TRANSLATIONS FROM LUCRETIUS

BY

R. C. TREVELYAN

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TO

G. LOWES DICKINSON

TRANSLATIONS FROM
LUCRETIUS

BOOK I, lines 1–328

Thou mother of the Aenead race, delight
Of men and deities, bountiful Venus, thou
Who under the sky's gliding constellations
Fillest ship-carrying ocean with thy presence
And the corn-bearing lands, since through thy power
Each kind of living creature is conceived
Then riseth and beholdeth the sun's light:
Before thee and thine advent the winds and clouds
Of heaven take flight, O goddess: daedal earth
Puts forth sweet-scented flowers beneath thy feet:
Beholding thee the smooth deep laughs, the sky
Grows calm and shines with wide-outspreading light.
For soon as the day's vernal countenance
Has been revealed, and fresh from wintry bonds
Blows the birth-giving breeze of the West wind,
First do the birds of air give sign of thee,
Goddess, and thine approach, as through their hearts
Thine influence smites. Next the wild herds of beasts
Bound over the rich pastures and swim through
The rapid streams, as captured by thy charm
Each one with eager longing follows thee
Whithersoever thou wouldst lure them on.
And thus through seas, mountains and rushing rivers,
Through the birds' leafy homes and the green plains,

Striking bland love into the hearts of all,
Thou art the cause that following his lust
Each should renew his race after his kind.
Therefore since thou alone art nature's mistress,
And since without thine aid naught can rise forth
Into the glorious regions of the light,
Nor aught grow to be gladsome and delectable,
Thee would I win to help me while I write
These verses, wherein I labour to describe
The nature of things in honour of my friend
This scion of the Memmian house, whom thou
Hast willed to be found peerless all his days
In every grace. Therefore the more, great deity,
Grant to my words eternal loveliness :
Cause meanwhile that the savage works of warfare
Over all seas and lands sink hushed to rest.
For thou alone hast power to bless mankind
With tranquil peace ; since of war's savage works
Mavors mighty in battle hath control,
Who oft flings himself back upon thy lap,
Quite vanquished by love's never-healing wound ;
And so with upturned face and shapely neck
Thrown backward, feeds with love his hungry looks,
Gazing on thee, goddess, while thus he lies
Supine, and on thy lips his spirit hangs.
O'er him thus couched upon thy holy body
Do thou bend down to enfold him, and from thy lips
Pour tender speech, petitioning calm peace,
O glorious divinity, for thy Romans.
For nor can we in our country's hour of trouble
Toil with a mind untroubled at our task,
Nor yet may the famed child of Memmius
Be spared from public service in such times.

For the rest,[1] leisured ears and a keen mind
Withdrawn from cares, lend to true reasoning,

[1] A few lines seem to have been lost here.

Lest my gifts, which with loving diligence
I set out for you, ere they be understood
You should reject disdainfully. For now
About the most high theory of the heavens
And of the deities, I will undertake
To tell you in my discourse, and will reveal
The first beginnings of existing things,
Out of which nature gives birth and increase
And nourishment to all things ; into which
Nature likewise, when they have been destroyed,
Resolves them back in turn. These we are wont,
In setting forth our argument, to call
Matter, or else begetting particles,
Or to name them the seeds of things : again
As primal atoms we shall speak of them,
Because from them first everything is formed.

When prostrate upon earth lay human life
Visibly trampled down and foully crushed
Beneath religion's cruelty, who meanwhile
Forth from the regions of the heavens above
Showed forth her face, lowering down on men
With horrible aspect, first did a man of Greece [1]
Dare to lift up his mortal eyes against her ;
The first was he to stand up and defy her.
Him neither stories of the gods, nor lightnings,
Nor heaven with muttering menaces could quell,
But all the more did they arouse his soul's
Keen valour, till he longed to be the first
To break through the fast-bolted doors of nature.
Therefore his fervent energy of mind
Prevailed, and he passed onward, voyaging far
Beyond the flaming ramparts of the world,
Ranging in mind and spirit far and wide
Throughout the unmeasured universe ; and thence
A conqueror he returns to us, bringing back

[1] Epicurus.

Knowledge both of what can and what cannot
Rise into being, teaching us in fine
Upon what principle each thing has its powers
Limited, and its deep-set boundary stone.
Therefore now has religion been cast down
Beneath men's feet, and trampled on in turn :
Ourselves heaven-high his victory exalts.

Herein this fear assails me, lest perchance
You should suppose I would initiate you
Into a school of reasoning unholy,
And set your feet upon a path of sin :
Whereas in truth often has this religion
Given birth to sinful and unholy deeds.
So once at Aulis did those chosen chiefs
Of Hellas, those most eminent among heros,
Foully defile the Trivian Virgin's altar
With Iphianassa's lifeblood. For so soon
As the fillet wreathed around her maiden locks
Streamed down in equal lengths from either cheek,
And soon as she was aware of her father standing
Sorrowful by the altar, and at his side
The priestly ministers hiding the knife,
And the folk shedding tears at sight of her,
Speechless in terror, dropping on her knees
To the earth she sank down. Nor in that hour
Of anguish might it avail her that she first
Had given the name of father to the king ;
For by the hands of men lifted on high
Shuddering to the altar she was borne,
Not that, when the due ceremonial rites
Had been accomplished, she might be escorted
By the clear-sounding hymenaeal song,
But that a stainless maiden foully stained,
In the very season of marriage she might fall
A sorrowful victim by a father's stroke,
That so there might be granted to the fleet

A happy and hallowed sailing. Such the crimes
Whereto religion has had power to prompt.

Yet there may come a time when you yourself,
Surrendering to the terror-breathing tales
Of seers and bards, will seek to abandon us.
Ay verily, how many dreams even now
May they be forging for you, which might well
Overturn your philosophy of life,
And trouble all your happiness with fear!
And with good cause: for if men could perceive
That there was a fixed limit to their sorrows,
By some means they would find strength to withstand
The hallowed lies and threatenings of these seers.
But as it is, men have no means, no power
To make a stand, since everlasting seem
The penalties that they must fear in death.
For none knows what is the nature of the soul,
Whether 'tis born, or on the contrary
Enters into our bodies at their birth:
Whether, when torn from us by death, it perishes
Together with us, or thereafter goes
To visit Orcus' glooms and the vast chasms;
Or penetrates by ordinance divine
Into brutes in man's stead, as sang our own
Ennius, who first from pleasant Helicon
Brought down a garland of unfading leaf,
Destined among Italian tribes of men
To win bright glory. And yet in spite of this
Ennius sets forth in immortal verse
That none the less there does exist a realm
Of Acheron, though neither do our souls
Nor bodies penetrate thither, but a kind
Of phantom images, pale in wondrous wise:
And thence it was, so he relates, that once
The ghost of ever-living Homer rose
Before him, shedding salt tears, and began

To unfold in discourse the nature of things.
Therefore not only must we grasp the truth
Concerning things on high, what principle
Controls the courses of the sun and moon,
And by what force all that takes place on earth
Is governed, but above all by keen thought
We must investigate whereof consists
The soul and the mind's nature, and what it is
That comes before us when we wake, if then
We are preyed on by disease, or when we lie
Buried in sleep, and terrifies our minds,
So that we seem face to face to behold
And hear those speaking to us who are dead,
Whose bones the earth now holds in its embrace.

Nor am I unaware how hard my task
In Latin verses to set clearly forth
The obscure truths discovered by the Greeks,
Chiefly because so much will need new terms
To deal with it, owing to our poverty
Of language, and the novelty of the themes.
Nevertheless your worth and the delight
Of your sweet friendship, which I hope to win,
Prompt me to bear the burden of any toil,
And lead me on to watch the calm nights through,
Seeking by means of what words and what measures
I may attain my end, and shed so clear
A light upon your spirit, that thereby
Your gaze may search the depths of hidden things.

This terror, then, and darkness of the mind
Must needs be scattered not by the sun's beams
And day's bright arrows, but by contemplation
Of nature's aspect and her inward law.
And this first principle of her design
Shall be our starting point: nothing is ever
By divine will begotten out of nothing.

In truth the reason fear so dominates
All mortals, is that they behold on earth
And in the sky many things happening,
Yet of these operations by no means
Can they perceive the causes, and so fancy
That they must come to pass by power divine.
Therefore when we have understood that nothing
Can be born out of nothing, we shall then
Win juster knowledge of the truth we seek,
Both from what elements each thing can be formed,
And in what way all things can come to pass
Without the intervention of the gods.

For if things came from nothing, any kind
Might be born out of anything; naught then
Would require seed. Thus men might rise from ocean
The scaly race out of the land, while birds
Might suddenly be hatched forth from the sky:
Cattle and other herds and every kind
Of wild beast, bred by no fixed law of birth,
Would roam o'er tilth and wilderness alike.
No fruit would remain constant to its tree,
But would change; every tree would bear all kinds.
For if there were not for each thing its own
Begetting particles, how could they have
A fixed unvarying mother? But in fact
Since all are formed from fixed seeds, each is born
And issues into the borders of the light
From that alone wherein resides its substance
And its first bodies. And for this cause all things
Cannot be generated out of all,
Since in each dwells its own particular power.
Again why do we see in spring the rose,
Corn in the summer's heat, vines bursting forth
When autumn summons them, if not because
When in their own time the fixed seeds of things
Have flowed together, there is then revealed

Whatever has been born, while the due seasons
Are present, and the quickened earth brings forth
Safely into the borders of the light
Its tender nurslings ? But if they were formed
From nothing, they would suddenly spring up
At unfixed periods and hostile times,
Since there would then be no fixed particles
To be kept from a begetting union
By the unpropitious season of the year.
Nor yet after the meeting of the seed
Would lapse of time be needed for their increase,
If they could grow from nothing. Suddenly
Small babes would become youths ; trees would arise
Shooting up in a moment from the ground.
But nothing of the kind, 'tis plain, takes place,
Seeing that all things grow little by little,
As befits, from determined seed, and growing
Preserve their kind : so that you may perceive
That all things become greater and are nourished
Out of their own material. Furthermore
Without fixed annual seasons for the rain
Earth could not put her gladdening produce forth,
Nor yet, if kept apart from nourishment,
Could living creatures propagate their kind
Or sustain life : so that with greater reason
You may think many things have many atoms
In common, as we see that different words
Have common letters, than that anything
Can come to being without first elements.
Again, why could not nature have produced
Men of such mighty bulk, that they could wade
Through the deep places of the sea, or rend
Huge mountains with their hands, or in one life
Overpass many living generations,
If not because there has been set apart
A changeless substance for begetting things,
And what can thence arise is predetermined ?

Therefore we must confess this truth, that nothing
Can come from nothing, since seed is required
For each thing, out of which it may be born
And lift itself into the air's soft breezes.
Lastly, since it is evident that tilled lands
Excel the untilled, and yield to labouring hands
A richer harvest, we may thence infer
That in the earth there must be primal atoms,
And these, labouring its soil, we stimulate
To rise, when with the coulter we turn up
The fertile clods. But if none such existed,
We should see all things without toil of ours
Spring forth far richer of their own accord.

Furthermore nature dissolves each form back
Into its own first particles, nor ever
Annihilates things. For if aught could be mortal
In all its parts, then it might from our eyes
Be snatched away to perish suddenly.
For there would be no need of any force
To cause disruption of its parts, and loosen
Their fastenings. But in fact each is composed
Of everlasting seeds ; so till some force
Arrives that with a blow can shatter things
To pieces, or can penetrate within
Their empty spaces, and so break them up,
Nature will not permit the dissolution
Of anything to be seen. Again, if time
Utterly destroys, consuming all the substance
Of whatsoever it removes from sight
Through lapse of ages, out of what does Venus
Bring back into the light of life the race
Of living creatures each after its kind ?
Or, once brought back, whence does the daedal earth
Feed and increase them, giving nourishment
To each after its kind ? Whence do its own
Fountains and far-drawn rivers from without

Keep full the sea ? Whence does the ether feed
The stars ? For infinite time and lapse of days
Surely must long since have devoured all things
Formed of a body that must die. But if
Throughout that period of time long past
Those atoms have existed out of which
This universe of things has been composed
And recomposed, 'tis plain they are possessed
Of an immortal nature : none of them
Therefore can turn to nothing. Then again
The same force and the same cause would destroy
All things without distinction, were it not
That an eternal substance held them fast,
A substance interwoven part with part
By bonds more or less close. For without doubt
A mere touch would be cause enough for death,
Seeing that any least amount of force
Must needs dissolve the texture of such things,
No one of which had an eternal body.
But in fact since the mutual fastenings
Between first elements are dissimilar,
And their substance eternal, things endure
With body uninjured, till some force arrives
Strong enough to dissolve the texture of each.
Therefore no single thing ever returns
To nothing, but at their disruption all
Pass back into the elements of matter.
Lastly the rain showers perish, when the sky father
Has flung them into the lap of mother earth.
But then bright crops spring up luxuriantly;
Boughs on the trees are green ; the trees themselves
Grow, and with fruits are laden : from this source
Moreover both our own race and the race
Of beasts are nourished ; for this cause we see
Glad towns teeming with children, leafy woods
With young birds' voices singing on all sides ;
For this cause cattle about the fertile meadows

Wearied with fatness lay their bodies down,
And from their swollen udders oozing falls
The white milk stream ; for this cause a new brood
Bounds on weak limbs over the soft grass, frisking
And gamboling, their young hearts with pure milk thrilled.
None therefore of those things that seem to perish
Utterly perishes, since nature forms
One thing out of another, and permits
Nothing to be begotten, unless first
She has been recruited by another's death.

Now listen : since I have proved to you that things
Cannot be formed from nothing, lest you yet
Should tend in any way to doubt my words,
Because the primal particles of things
Can never be distinguished by the eyes,
I will proceed to give you instances
Of bodies which yourself you must admit
Are real things, yet cannot be perceived.
First the wind's wakened force scourges the sea,
Whelming huge ships and scattering the clouds ;
And sometimes with impetuous hurricane
Scouring the plains, it strews them with great trees,
And ravages with forest-rending blasts
The mountain-tops : with such rude savagery
Does the wind howl and bluster and wreak its rage
With menacing uproar. Therefore past all doubt
Winds must be formed of unseen particles
That sweep the seas, the lands, the clouds of heaven,
Ravaging and dishevelling them all
With fitful hurricane gusts. Onward they stream
Multiplying destruction, just as when
The soft nature of water suddenly
Swoops forward in one overwhelming flood
Swelled with abundant rains by a mighty spate
Of water rushing down from the high hills,
Hurtling together broken forest boughs

And entire trees : nor can the sturdy bridges
Sustain the oncoming water's sudden force :
In such wise turbulent with much rain the river
Flings its whole mighty strength against the piles.
With a loud crashing roar it then deals havoc,
And rolls the huge stones on beneath its waves,
Sweeping before it all that stems its flood.
In this way then wind-blasts must likewise move ;
And when like a strong stream they have hurled themselves
Towards any quarter, they thrust things along
And with repeated onslaughts overwhelm them,
Often in writhing eddy seizing them
To bear them away in swiftly circling swirl.
Therefore beyond all doubt winds are composed
Of unseen atoms, since in their works and ways
We find that they resemble mighty rivers
Which are of visible substance. Then again
We can perceive the various scents of things,
Yet never see them coming to our nostrils :
Heat too we see not, nor can we observe
Cold with our eyes, nor ever behold words :
Yet must all these be of a bodily nature,
Since they are able to act upon our senses.
For naught can touch or be touched except body.
Clothes also, hung up on a shore where waves
Are breaking, become moist, and then grow dry
If spread out in the sun. Yet in what way
The water's moisture has soaked into them,
Has not been seen, nor again in what way
The heat has driven it out. The moisture therefore
Is dispersed into tiny particles,
Which our eyes have no power to see at all.
Furthermore after many revolutions
Of the sun's year, a finger-ring is thinned
On the under side by being worn : the fall
Of dripping eave-drops hollows out a stone :
The bent ploughshare of iron insensibly

Grows smaller in the fields ; and we behold
The paving stones of roads worn down at length
By the footsteps of the people. Then again
The brazen statues at the city gates
Show right hands wearing thinner by the touch
Of those who greet them ever as they pass by.
Thus we perceive that all such things grow less
Because they have been worn down : and yet what atoms
Are leaving them each moment, that the jealous
Nature of vision has quite shut us out
From seeing. Finally whatever time
And nature gradually add to things,
Obliging them to grow in due proportion,
No effort of our eyesight can behold.
So too whenever things grow old by age
Or through corruption, and wherever rocks
That overhang the sea are gnawed away
By the corroding brine, you cannot discern
What they are losing at any single moment.
Thus nature operates by unseen atoms.

BOOK II, lines 991–1174

Moreover we are sprung, all we that live,
From heavenly seed: there is, for all, that same
One father[1]; from whom when the bounteous Earth,
Our mother, has drunk in the liquid drops
Of moisture, then by him impregnated
She bears bright crops and glad trees and the race
Of men, bears every species of wild beast,
Furnishing food with which all feed their bodies,
And lead a pleasant life, and propagate
Their offspring. Wherefore justly she has won
The name of mother. Also that which once
Came from the earth, sinks back into the earth,
And what was sent down from the coasts of aether,
Returning thither, is received once more
Into the mansions of the sky. So death
Does not demolish things in such a way
As to destroy the particles of matter,
But only dissipates their union,
Then recombines one element with another,
And so brings it to pass that all things change
Their shapes, alter their colours, and receive
Sensations, then in a moment yield them up.
Thus you may learn how greatly it signifies
Both with what others and in what positions
The same primordial atoms are held bound;
Also what motions they are mutually
Imparting and receiving: and thus too
You need no more suppose that what we see
Hovering upon the surfaces of things,
Or now being born, then suddenly perishing,[2]

[1] The aether. [2] Colour, sensation, etc.

Can be inherent qualities in atoms
That are eternal. Nay, in my verses even
It is of moment with what other letters
And in what order each one has been placed.
If not all, yet by far the greater part
Are similar letters : but as their position
Varies, so do the words sound different.
Thus too with actual things, whenever change
Takes place in the collisions motions order
Shape and position of their material atoms,
Then also must the things themselves be changed.

Now to true reasoning turn your mind, I pray ;
For a new theme is struggling urgently
To reach your ears, a new aspect of things
Would now reveal itself. But there is naught
So easy, that at first it will not seem
Difficult of belief, and likewise naught
So mighty, naught so wondrous, but that all
Little by little abate their wonder at it.
Consider first the colour of the heavens,
So bright and pure, and all that they contain,
The stars wandering everywhere, the moon
And the surpassing radiance of the sun ;
If all these sights were now for the first time
To be revealed to mortals suddenly
And without warning, what could have been described
That would have seemed more marvellous than such
things,
Or that humanity could less have dared
Beforehand to believe might come to pass ?
Nothing, I think : so wonderful had been
This spectacle. Yet think how no one now,
Wearied to satiety at the sight,
Deigns to look up at the sky's shining quarters.
Cease therefore to cast reason from your mind
Terrified by mere novelty, but rather

Weigh facts with eager judgment ; and if then
They appear true, surrender ; if they seem
A falsehood, gird yourself to prove them so.
For since the sum of space outside, beyond
This world's walls, must be infinite, the mind seeks
To reason as to what may else exist
Yonder in regions whither the intellect
Is constantly desiring to prospect,
And whither the projection of our thought
Reaches in free flight of its own accord.

Now first of all we find that everywhere
In all directions, horizontally,
Below and above throughout the universe
There is no limit, as I have demonstrated.
Indeed the facts themselves proclaim the truth,
And the deep void reveals its nature clearly.
Since then on all sides vacant space extends
Illimitably, and seeds in countless number
And sum immeasurable flit to and fro
Eternally driven on in manifold modes
Of motion, we must deem it in no wise
Probable that this single globe of earth
And this one heaven alone have been created,
While outside all those particles of matter
Are doing nothing : the more so that this world
Was formed by nature, as the seeds of things,
Casually colliding of their own
Spontaneous motion, flocked in manifold ways
Together, vainly, without aim or result,
Until at last such particles combined
As, suddenly thrown together, might become
From time to time the rudiments of great things,
Earth, sea, sky, and the race of living creatures.
Therefore beyond all question we are bound
To admit that elsewhere other aggregates
Of matter must exist, resembling this

Which in its greedy embrace our aether holds.
Moreover, when much matter is at hand,
And space is there, nor any obstacle
Nor cause of hindrance, then you may be sure
Things must be forming and dissolving there.
Now if there be so vast a store of seeds
That the whole lifetime of all conscious beings
Would fail to count them, and if likewise nature
Abides the same, and so can throw together
The seeds of things each into its own place,
In the same manner as they were thrown together
Into our world, then you must needs admit
That in other regions there are other earths,
And diverse stocks of men and kinds of beasts.

Besides in the whole universe there exists
No one thing that is born unique, and grows
Unique and sole ; but it must needs belong
To one class, and there must be many others
Of the same kind. Consider first of all
Live creatures : you will find that thus are born
The mountain-ranging breeds of savage beasts,
Thus the human race, thus also the dumb shoals
Of scaly fish and every flying fowl.
Therefore by a like reasoning you must grant
That sky and earth and sun, moon, sea and all
That else exists, are not unique, but rather
Of number innumerable ; since life's deep-fixed
Boundary stone as surely awaits these,
And they are of a body that has birth
As much as any species here on earth
Abounding in examples of its kind.

If you learn well and keep these truths in mind,
Nature, forthwith enfranchised and released
From her proud lords, is seen then to be acting
In all things of herself spontaneously

Without the interference of the gods.
For by the holy breasts of those divinities,
Who in calm peace are passing tranquil days
Of life untroubled, who, I ask, has power
To rule the sum of space immeasurable ?
Or who to hold in his controlling hand
The strong reins of the deep ? Who can at once
Make all those various firmaments revolve
And with the fires of aether warm each one
Of all those fruitful earths, or at all times
Be present in all places, so to cause
Darkness by clouds, and shake the calms of heaven
With thunder, to hurl lightnings, and ofttimes
Shatter down his own temples, or withdraw
To desert regions, there to spend his fury
And exercise his bolt, which often indeed
Passes the guilty by, and strikes with death
The unoffending who deserve it least.

Now since the birth-time of the world, since sea
And earth's first natal day and the sun's origin,
Many atoms have been added from without,
Many seeds from all round, which, shooting them
Hither and thither, the great universe
Has brought together : and by means of these
Sea and land have been able to increase ;
Thus too the mansion of the sky has gained
New spaciousness, and lifted its high roof
Far above earth, and the air has risen with it.
For to each thing its own appropriate atoms
Are all distributed by blows from all
Regions of space, so that they separate
Into their proper elements. Moisture joins
With moisture : earth from earthy substance grows ;
Fires generate fire, and ether ether,
Till Nature, the creatress, consummating
Her labour, has brought all things to their last

Limit of growth ; as happens, when at length
That which is entering the veins of life
Is now no more than what is flowing away
And ebbing thence. In all things at this point
The age of growth must halt : at this point nature
Curbs increase by her powers. For all such things
As you may see waxing with joyous growth,
And climbing step by step to matured age
Receive into themselves more particles
Than they discharge, so long as food is passing
Easily into all their veins, and while
They are not so widely spread as to throw off
Too many atoms and to cause more waste
Than what their life requires for nourishment.
For we must surely grant that many atoms
Are flowing away from things and leaving them :
But still more must be added, till at length
They have attained the highest pitch of growth.
Then age little by little breaks their powers
And their mature strength, as it wastes away
On the worse side of life. And out of doubt
The bulkier and the wider a thing is,
Once its growth ceases, the more particles
Does it now shed around it and discharge
On all sides : nor is food distributed
Easily into all its veins, nor yet
In quantity sufficient that therefrom
A supply may continually rise up
To compensate the copious emanations
Which it exhales. For there is need of food
To preserve all things by renewing them :
Food must uphold, food sustain everything :
Yet all is to no purpose, since the veins
Fail to convey what should suffice, nor yet
Does nature furnish all that is required.
There is good reason therefore why all forms
Should perish, when they are rarefied by flux

Of atoms, and succumb to external blows,
Since food must fail advanced age in the end,
And atoms cease not ever from outside
To buffet each thing till they wear it out
And overpower it by beleaguering blows.
In this way then it is that the walls too
Of the great world from all sides shall be stormed
And so collapsing crumble away to ruins.
And even now already this world's age
Is broken, and the worn-out earth can scarce
Create the tiniest animals, she who once
Created every kind, and brought to birth
The huge shapes of wild beasts. For, as I think,
Neither did any golden rope let down
The tribes of mortal creatures from the heights
Of heaven on to the fields, nor did the sea
Nor its waves beating on the rocks create them,
But the same earth gave birth to them, which now
Feeds them from her own breast. At first moreover
Herself spontaneously did she create
Flourishing crops and rich vines for mankind,
Herself gave them sweet fruits and joyous pastures;
Which now, though aided by our toil, scarce grow
To any size. Thus we wear out our oxen
And the strength of our peasants: we use up
Our iron tools; yet hardly do we win
A sustenance from the fields, so niggardly
They grudge their produce and increase our toil.
And now shaking his head the aged ploughman
Sighs ever and anon, when he beholds
The labours of his hands all spent in vain;
And when with times past he compares the present,
He praises often the fortune of his sire,
Harping upon that ancient race of men
Who rich in piety supported life
Upon their narrow plots contentedly,
Seeing the land allotted to each man

Was far less in those days than now. So too
The planter of the worn-out shrivelled vine
Disconsolately inveighs against the march
Of time, wearying heaven with complaints,
And understands not how all things are wasting
Little by little, and passing to the grave
Tired out by lengthening age and lapse of days.

BOOK III, lines 1–160

Thou, who from out such darkness first could'st lift
A torch so bright, illumining thereby
The benefits of life, thee do I follow,
O thou bright glory of the Grecian race,
And in thy deepset footprints firmly now
I plant my steps, not so much through desire
To rival thee, rather because I love
And therefore long to imitate thee : for how
Should a mere swallow strive with swans ; or what
Might kids with tottering limbs, matched in a race,
Achieve against a horse's stalwart strength ?
Thou, father, art discoverer of truth ;
Thou dost enrich us with a father's precepts ;
And from thy pages, glorious sage, as bees
In flowery glades sip from all plants, so we
Feed likewise upon all thy golden words,
Golden words, ever worthy of endless life.
For soon as, issuing from thy godlike mind,
Thy doctrine has begun to voice abroad
The nature of things, straightway the soul's terrors
Take flight ; the world's walls open ; I behold
Things being formed and changed throughout all space.
Revealed is the divinity of the gods,
And their serene abodes, which neither winds
Buffet, nor clouds drench them with showers, nor snow
Congealed by sharp frost, falling in white flakes,
Violates, but an ever-cloudless sky
Invests them, laughing with wide-spreading light.
Moreover all their wants nature provides,
And there is nothing that at any time

Can minish their tranquillity of soul.
But on the other hand nowhere are visible
The Acherusian quarters ; and yet earth
In no wise can obstruct our contemplation
Of all those operations that take place
Beneath our feet throughout the nether void.
At such thoughts there comes over me a kind
Of godlike pleasure mixed with thrilling awe,
That nature by thy power should be thus clearly
Made manifest and unveiled on every side.

Now since I have demonstrated of what kind
Are the beginnings of all things, and how
Varying are the divers shapes wherein
They are flying onward of their own free will,
Driven in eternal motion, and in what way
Out of these can be formed each several thing,
After these themes it would seem best that now
The nature of the mind and of the soul
Should be elucidated in my verses,
And fear of Acheron driven headlong forth,
That dread which troubles from its lowest depths
The life of man, and brooding over all
With the blackness of death, will not allow
Any pleasure to be unalloyed and pure.
For though men often tell us that diseases
And a life of public shame are to be feared
Far more than Tartarus, the house of death,
And that they know the nature of the soul
To be of blood, or even perhaps of wind,
If such should be their fancy, and that so
They have no need of our philosophy,
Yet from the following proof you may perceive
That all these boasts are uttered to win praise
Rather than from conviction of the truth.
These same men, exiled from their fatherland,
And banished far from human sight, disgraced

By foul crime, and beset by every kind
Of wretchedness, none the less still live on,
And to whatever place they bear their misery,
In spite of all make offerings to the dead,
Slaughter black sheep, and to the nether powers
Do sacrifice, and in their bitter plight
Turn their thoughts to religion far more zealously.
Thus you can better judge a man in stress
Of peril, and amidst adversities
Discover what he is ; for then at last
The language of sincerity and truth
Is wrung forth from the bottom of his heart ;
The mask is torn off ; what is real remains.
Moreover avarice and blinding lust
For honours, which compel unhappy men
To overpass the bounds of right, and sometimes,
As partners and accomplices of crime,
To struggle with vast effort night and day
Till they emerge upon the heights of power—
These sores of life are in no small degree
Fostered by fear of death. For foul contempt
And biting penury are mostly thought
To be quite different from a pleasurable
And secure life : rather they seem to be
Already but a kind of lingering
Before the gates of death. And so while men,
Urged by an unreal terror, long to escape
Far from these ills and drive them far away,
They pile up wealth by shedding civil blood,
Doubling their riches greedily, while they heap
Massacre upon massacre, rejoice
Ruthlessly in the sad death of a brother,
And shun their kinsmen's board in hate and dread.
Often likewise owing to this same fear
They pine with envy because some other man
In the world's eyes is powerful, some other
Is gazed at, as he walks robed in bright honours,

While they complain that they themselves are wallowing
In darkness and in filth. Some sink their lives
In ruin to win statues and a name,
And often with such force, through dread of death,
Does hatred of life and of the sight of day
Seize upon mortals, that with anguished heart
They will destroy themselves, forgetting quite
How this fear is the well-spring of their cares,
This it is that enfeebles honour, this
That bursts the bonds of friendship, and in fine
Prompts them to cast all duty to the ground.
Since often ere now men have betrayed their country
And beloved parents, seeking so to shun
The realms of Acheron. For just as children
In the blind darkness tremble and are afraid
Of all things, so we sometimes in the light
Fear things that are no whit more to be dreaded
Than those which children shudder at in the dark
Imagining that they will come to pass.
This terror, then, and darkness of the mind
Must needs be scattered not by the sun's beams
And day's bright arrows, but by contemplation
Of nature's aspect and her inward law.

First then the mind, which we shall often call
The intellect, wherein is placed the council
And government of life, I assert to be
No less a part of man than feet and hands
And eyes are part of the whole living creature.
Yet some would have it that the sense of the mind
Resides in no fixed part, but deem it rather
A kind of vital habit of the body,
Which by the Greeks is called a harmony,
Something that causes us to live with sense,
Although the intellect is in no one part.
Just as good health is often spoken of

As though belonging to the body, and yet
It is no one part of a healthy man.
Thus they refuse to place the sense of the mind
In one fixed part: and here to me they seem
To wander far indeed astray from truth.
For often the body, which is visible,
Is sick, while in some other hidden part
We experience pleasure; and ofttimes again
The contrary will happen, when a man
Who is distressed in mind, through his whole body
Feels pleasure: in the same way as the foot
Of a sick man may suffer pain, and yet
His head meanwhile is in no pain at all.
Moreover when the limbs are given up
To soft sleep, and the wearied body lies
Diffused without sensation, there is yet
Something else in us which at that same time
Is stirred in many ways, and into itself
Receives all the emotions of delight,
And all the empty troubles of the heart.
Now, that the soul too dwells within the limbs,
And that it is no harmony whereby
The body is wont to feel, this main proof shows.
When from the body much has been removed,
Yet often life still lingers in our limbs:
Whereas, when a few particles of heat
Have been dispersed, and through the mouth some air
Has been forced out, suddenly that same life
Deserts the arteries and quits the bones:
Whence you may learn that not all particles
Have functions of like moment, nor alike
Support existence; but that rather those
Which are the seeds of wind and warming heat
Are the cause that life stays within the limbs.
Therefore this vital heat and wind, residing
Within the body itself, is that which quits
Our dying frame. So now that we have found

The nature of the mind and of the soul
To be a part in some sense of the man,
Let us give up the name of harmony,
Which was brought down from lofty Helicon
To the musicians, or else they themselves,
Taking it from some other source, transferred it
To what was then without a name of its own.
However that may be, why, let them keep it.
Do you give heed to the rest of my discourse.

Now I maintain that mind and soul are bound
In union with each other, forming so
A single substance, but that the lord that rules
Throughout the body is the reasoning power
Which we call mind and intellect. Its seat
Is fixed in the middle region of the breast.
For here it is that fear and panic throb :
Around these parts dwell joys that soothe. Here then
Is the intellect or mind. The rest of the soul
Dispersed through the whole body, obeys and moves
At the will and propulsion of the mind,
Which for itself and by itself alone
Has knowledge and rejoices for itself,
When nothing at that time moves soul or body.
And just as, when we are attacked by pain
In head or eye, we do not feel distress
Through our whole body too, so often the mind
Suffers pain by itself, or is envigoured
By happiness, when all the rest of the soul
Throughout the limbs and frame remains unstirred
By any new sensation. But when the mind
Has been perturbed by some more vehement fear,
We see the whole soul feel with it in unison
Through all the limbs ; sweating and paleness then
Spread over the whole body ; the tongue halts,
Speech dies away, the eyes grow dark with mist,
The ears ring and the limbs sink under us.

And indeed often we see men drop down
From terror of mind. Hence easily we may learn
That the soul is united with the mind;
For when it has been struck by the mind's force,
Straightway it pushes and propels the body.

BOOK III, lines 830–1094

Death then is nothing to us, nor one jot
Does it concern us, since the nature of mind
Is thus proved mortal. And as in times long past
We felt no unhappiness when from every side
Gathering for conflict came the Punic hosts,
And all that was beneath the height of heaven,
Shaken by the tumult and dismay of war,
Shuddered and quaked, and mortals were in doubt
To whose empire all human things would fall
By land and sea, so when we are no more,
When body and soul, whereof we were composed
Into one being shall have been divorced,
'Tis plain nothing whatever shall have power
To trouble us, who then shall be no more,
Or stir our senses, no, not if earth with sea
In ruin shall be mingled, and sea with sky.
And even though the powers of mind and soul
After they have been severed from the body
Were still to feel, yet that to us is nothing,
Who by the binding marriage tie between
Body and soul are formed into one being.
Nor if Time should collect our scattered atoms
After our death, and should restore them back
To where they now are placed, and if once more
The light of light were given us, not even that
Would in the least concern us, once the chain
Of self-awareness had been snapped asunder.
So too now what we may have been before
Concerns us not, nor causes us distress.
For when you look back on the whole past course
Of infinite time, and think how manifold

Must be the modes of matter's flux, then easily
May you believe this too, that these same atoms
Of which we now are formed, have often before
Been placed in the same order as they are now.
Yet this can no remembrance bring us back.
For a break in life has since been interposed,
And all our atoms wandering dispersed
Have strayed far from that former consciousness.
For if a man be destined to endure
Misery and suffering, he must first exist
In his own person at that very time
When evil should befall him. But since death
Precludes this, and forbids him to exist
Who was to endure distress, we may be sure
That in death there is nothing we need dread,
That he who exists not cannot become miserable,
And that it makes no difference at all
Whether he shall already have been born
In some past time, when once he has been robbed
By death that dies not of his life that dies.

Therefore if you should chance to hear some man
Pitying his own lot, that after death
Either his body must decay in the earth,
Or be consumed by flames or jaws of beasts,
Then may you know that his words ring not true,
That in his heart there lurks some secret sting,
Though he himself deny that he believes
Any sense will remain with him in death.
For in fact he grants not all that he professes,
Nor by the roots does he expel and thrust
Self forth from life, but all unwittingly
Assumes that of self something will survive.
For when a living man forbodes that birds
And beasts may rend his body after death,
Then does he pity himself, nor can he quite
Separate and withdraw from the outcast body,

But fancying that that other is himself,
With his own sense imagines it endued.
So he complains because he was born mortal,
Nor sees that there will be in real death
No other self which living can lament
That he has perished, none that will stand by
And grieve over his burnt and mangled corpse.
For if it be an evil after death
To be mauled by teeth of beasts, why should it seem
Less cruel to be laid out on a pyre
And scorched with hot flames, or to be embalmed
In stifling honey, or to lie stiff and cold
Couched on the cool slab of a chilly stone,
Or to be crushed down under a weight of earth ?

" Now no more shall thy home, nor thy chaste wife
Receive thee in gladness, nor shall thy sweet children
Run forth to meet thee and snatch kisses from thee,
And touch thee to the heart with silent joy.
No more canst thou be prosperous in thy doings,
A bulwark to thy friends. Poor wretch ! " men cry,
" How wretchedly has one disastrous day
Stript thee of all life's many benefits ! "
Yet this withal they add not : " Nor henceforth
Does craving for these things beset thee more."
This truth, could men but grasp it once in thought
And follow thought with words, would forthwith set
Their spirits free from a huge ache and dread.
" Thou, as thou art, sunk in the sleep of death,
Shalt so continue through all time to come,
Delivered from all feverish miseries :
But we who watched thee on thy dreadful pyre
Change into ashes, we insatiably
Bewept thee ; nor shall any lapse of days
Remove that lifelong sorrow from our hearts."
Of him who spoke thus, well might we inquire,
What grief so exceeding bitter is there here,

If in the end all comes to sleep and rest,
That one should therefore pine with lifelong misery.

This too is oft men's wont, when they lie feasting
Wine-cup in hand with garland-shaded brows :
Thus from the heart they speak : " Brief is life's joy
For poor frail men. Soon will it be no more,
Nor ever afterwards may it be called back."
As though a foremost evil to be feared
After their death were this, that parching thirst
Would burn and scorch them in their misery,
Or craving for aught else would then beset them.
No, for none feels the want of self and life,
When mind and body are sunk in sleep together.
For all we care, such sleep might be eternal :
No craving for ourselves moves us at all.
And yet, when starting up from sleep a man
Collects himself, then the atoms of his soul
Throughout his frame cannot be wandering far
From their sense-stirring motions. Therefore death
Must needs be thought far less to us than sleep,
If less can be than what we see is nothing.
For the dispersion of the crowded atoms,
That comes with death, is greater ; nor has ever
Anyone yet awakened, upon whom
Has once fallen the chill arrest of death.

Furthermore, if Nature suddenly found voice,
And thus in person upbraided one of us :
" What is it, mortal, can afflict thee so,
That thou to such exceeding bitter grief
Shouldst yield ? Why thus bemoan and bewail death ?
For if the life thou hast lived hitherto
Was pleasant to thee, and not all thy blessings,
As though poured into a perforated jar,
Have flowed through and gone thanklessly to waste,
Why not then, like a guest replete with life,

Take thy departure, and resignedly
Enter, thou fool, upon secure repose ?
But if all that thou hast enjoyed has perished
Squandered away, and life is a mere grievance,
Why seek to add thereto, what in its turn
Must all come to destruction and be lost
Unprofitably ? Why both of life and travail
Dost thou not rather make an end at once ?
For there is nothing more I can contrive
Or find to please thee. All things are the same
At all times. Though thy body be not yet
Decayed with years, nor have thy worn-out limbs
Grown feeble, yet all things remain the same ;
Though thou shouldst overlive all generations,
Nay, even more if thou shouldst never die."
What could we answer, save that Nature's claim
Was just, and her indictment a true plea ?
But if some other more advanced in years
Should miserably complain and lament death
Beyond all reason, would she not yet more justly
Lift up her voice and chide him with sharp speech ?
" Hence with thy tears, buffoon. Cease thy complaints.
After thou hast enjoyed all life's best gifts
Thou now decayest. But because thou hast yearned
Always for what was absent, and despised
That which was present, life has glided from thee
Incomplete and unprofitable. So now
Ere thou didst look for it, at thy pillow Death
Has taken his stand, before thou canst depart
Satisfied with existence and replete.
But now resign all vanities that so ill
Befit thine age : come then, with a good grace
Rise and make room for others ; for thou must."
Justly, I think, would she so plead with him,
Justly reproach and chide : for things grown old
Yield place and are supplanted evermore
By new, and each thing out of something else

Must be replenished ; nor to the black pit
Of Tartarus was yet any man consigned.
Matter is needed, that therefrom may grow
Succeeding generations : which yet all,
When they have lived their life, shall follow thee.
Thus it is all have perished in past times
No less than thou, and shall hereafter perish.
So one thing out of another shall not cease
For ever to arise ; and life is given
To none in fee, to all in usufruct.
Consider likewise how eternal Time's
Bygone antiquity before our birth
Was nothing to us. In such wise does Nature
Show us the time to come after our death
As in a mirror. Is aught visible
Therein so appalling ? aught that seems like gloom ?
Is it not more secure than any sleep ?

Moreover all those things which people say
Are found in Acheron's gulf, assuredly
Exist for us in life. No wretched Tantalus,
Numbed by vain terror, quakes, as the tale tells,
Beneath a huge rock hanging in the air ;
But in life rather an empty fear of gods
Oppresses mortals ; and the fall they dread
Is fortune's fall, which chance may bring to each.
Nor verily entering the large breast of Tityos,
As he lies stretched in Acheron, do vultures
Find food there for their beaks perpetually.
How vast soever his body's bulk extends,
Though not nine acres merely with outspread limbs
He cover, but the round of the whole earth,
Yet would he not be able to endure
Eternal pain, nor out of his whole body
For ever provide food. But here for us
He is a Tityos, whom, while he lies
In bonds of love, fretful anxieties

Devour like rending birds of prey, or cares,
Sprung from some other craving, lacerate.
A living Sisyphus also we behold
In him who from the people fain would beg
The rods and cruel axes, and each time
Defeated and disconsolate must retire.
For to beg power, which, empty as it is,
Is never given, and in pursuit thereof
To endure grievous toil continually,
Is but to thrust uphill mightily straining
A stone, which from the summit after all
Rolls bounding back down to the level plain.
Moreover to be feeding evermore
The thankless nature of the mind, yet never
To fill it full and sate it with good things,
As do the seasons for us, when each year
They return bringing fruits and varied charms,
Yet never are we filled with life's delights,
This surely is what is told of those young brides,
Who must pour water into a punctured vessel,
Though they can have no hope to fill it full.
Cerberus and the Furies in like manner
Are fables, and that world deprived of day
Where from its throat Tartarus belches forth
Horrible flames : which things in truth are not,
Nor can be anywhere. But there is in life
A dread of punishment for things ill done,
Terrible as the deeds are terrible ;
And to expiate men's guilt there is the dungeon,
The awful hurling downward from the rock,
Scourgings, mutilations and impalings,
The pitch, the torches and the metal plate.
And even if these be wanting, yet the mind
Conscious of guilt torments itself with goads
And scorching whips, nor in its boding fear
Perceives what end of misery there can be,
Nor what limit at length to punishment,

Nay fears lest these same evils after death
Should prove more grievous. Thus does the life of fools
Become at last an Acheron here on earth.

This too thou may'st say sometimes to thyself :
" Even the good king Ancus closed his eyes
To the light of day, who was so many times
Worthier than thou, unconscionable man.
And since then many others who bore rule
O'er mighty nations, princes and potentates,
Have perished : and he too, even he, who once
Across the great sea paved a path whereby
His legions might pass over, bidding them
Cross dry-shod the salt deeps, and to show scorn
Trampled upon the roarings of the waves
With horses, even he, bereft of light,
Forth from his dying body gasped his soul.
The Scipios' offspring, thunderbolt of war,
Terror of Carthage, gave his bones to the earth,
As though he were the meanest household slave.
Consider too the inventors of wise thoughts
And arts that charm, consider the companions
Of the Heliconian Maidens, among whom
Homer still bears the sceptre without peer ;
Yet he now sleeps the same sleep as they all.
Likewise Democritus, when a ripe old age
Had warned him that the memory-stirring motions
Were waning in his mind, by his own act
Willingly offered up his head to death.
Even Epicurus died, when his life's light
Had run its course, he who in intellect
Surpassed the race of men, quenching the glory
Of all else, as the sun in heaven arising
Quenches the stars. Then wilt thou hesitate
And feel aggrieved to die ? thou for whom life
Is well nigh dead, whilst yet thou art alive

And lookest on the light ; thou who dost waste
Most of thy time in sleep, and waking snorest,
Nor ceasest to see dreams ; who hast a mind
Troubled with empty terror, and ofttimes
Canst not discover what it is that ails thee,
When, poor besotted wretch, from every side
Cares crowd upon thee, and thou goest astray
Drifting in blind perplexity of soul."

If men not only were to feel this load
That weighs upon their mind and wears them out,
But might have knowledge also of its cause
And whence comes this great pile of misery
Crushing their breasts, they would not spend their lives,
As now so oft we see them, ignorant
Each of his life's true ends, and seeking ever
By change of place to lay his burden down.
Often, issuing forth from his great mansion, he
Who is weary of home will suddenly return
Perceiving that abroad he is none the happier.
He posts to his villa galloping his ponies,
As though hurrying with help to a house on fire,
Yawns on the very threshold, nay sinks down
Heavily into sleep to seek oblivion,
Or even perhaps starts headlong back to town.
In this way each man flies from his own self,
Yet from that self in fact he has no power
To escape. He clings to it in his own despite,
Although he loathes it, seeing that he is sick,
Yet perceives not the cause of his disease :
Which if he could but comprehend aright,
Relinquishing all else, each man would study
To learn the Nature of Reality,
Since 'tis our state during eternal time,
Not for one hour merely, that is in doubt,
That state wherein mortals must pass the whole
Of what may still await them after death.

And in conclusion, what base lust of life
Is this, that can so potently compel us
In dubious perils to feel such dismay ?
For indeed certain is the end of life
That awaits mortals, nor can death be shunned.
Meet it we must. Furthermore in the same
Pursuits and actions do we pass our days
For ever, nor may we by living on
Forge for ourselves any new form of pleasure.
But what we crave, while it is absent, seems
To excel all things else ; then, when 'tis ours,
We crave some other thing, gaping wide-mouthed,
Always possessed by the same thirst of life.
What fortune future time may bring, we know not,
Nor what chance has in store for us, nor yet
What end awaits us. By prolonging life
No least jot may we take from death's duration ;
Nought may we steal away therefrom, that so
Haply a less long while we may be dead.
Therefore as many ages as you please
Add to your life's account, yet none the less
Will that eternal death be waiting for you.
And not less long will that man be no more,
Who from to-day has ceased to live, than he
Who has died many months and years ago.

BOOK IV, lines 962–1287

And generally to what pursuits soever
Each of us is attached and closely tied,
Or on whatever tasks we have been used
To spend much time, so that therein the mind
Has borne unwonted strain, in those same tasks
We mostly seem in sleep to be engaged.
Lawyers imagine they are pleading causes,
Or drafting deeds; generals that they are fighting
In some pitched battle; mariners that they still
Are waging with the winds their lifelong war;
And we that we are toiling at our task,
Questioning ever the nature of all things,
And setting our discoveries forth in books
Written in our native tongue. And thus in general
Do all other pursuits and arts appear
To fill men's minds and mock them during sleep.
And with those who for many days together
Have watched stage shows with unremitting zeal,
We generally find that when they have ceased
To apprehend them with their senses, yet
Passages remain open in the mind
Through which the same images of things may enter.
Thus the same sights for many days keep passing
Before their eyes, so that even when awake
They seem to be beholding figures dancing
And moving supple limbs; also their ears
Seem to be listening clear-toned melodies
Of the lyre's eloquent strings, while they behold
In fancy the same audience, the stage too,
Glowing with all its varied scenery.
So great the influence of zeal and pleasure,

And of those tasks whereon not only men
Are wont to spend their energies, but even
All living animals. Thus you will see
Strong horses, when their limbs are lying at rest,
Nevertheless in slumber sweat and pant
Continually, and as though to win some prize
Strain their strength to the utmost, or else struggle
To start, as if the barriers were thrown open.
And often hunters' dogs while softly slumbering
Will yet suddenly toss their legs about
And utter hurried yelps, sniffing the air
Again and again, as though following the trail
Of wild beasts they have scented : and roused from sleep
They often chase the empty images
Of stags, as if they saw them in full flight,
Till having shaken their delusions off
They come back to themselves. But the tame brood
Of dogs reared in the house, will shake themselves
And start up from the ground, as if they saw
Unknown figures and faces : and the more savage
Each breed is, the more fierce must be its dreams.
And in the night-time birds of various kinds,
Suddenly taking flight, trouble with their wings
The groves of deities, when in gentle sleep
Hawks have appeared threatening them with havoc
Of battle, flying after them in pursuit.
Again the minds of men, which greatly labouring
Achieve great aims, will often during sleep
Act and perform the same. Kings take by storm,
Are made captive, join battle, cry aloud
As though assassinated then and there.
Many men struggle and utter groans in pain,
And as though mangled by a panther's fangs
Or savage lion's, fill the whole neighbourhood
With vehement clamourings. Many in their sleep
Discourse of great affairs, and often so
Have revealed their own guilt. Many meet death :

Many, as though falling with all their weight
From high cliffs to the ground, are scared with terror,
And like men reft of reason, hardly from sleep
Come to themselves again, being quite distraught
By the body's tumult. Likewise a man will sit
Thirsting beside a river or pleasant spring
And gulp almost the whole stream down his throat.
Innocent children also, slumber-bound,
Often believe they are lifting up their dress
By a tank or broken vessel, and so pour
The liquid, drained from their whole body, forth,
Soaking the gorgeous-hued magnificence
Of Babylonian coverlets. Then too
To those into the currents of whose age
For the first time seed is entering, when the ripe
Fulness of time has formed it in their limbs,
From without there come images emanating
From some chance body, announcing a glorious face
And beautiful colouring, that excites and stirs
Those parts that have grown turgid with much seed,
So that, as if all things had been performed,
The full tide overflows and stains their vesture.

This seed whereof we spoke is stirred in us
When first ripening age confirms our frame.
For different causes move and stimulate
Different things. From man the influence
Of man alone rouses forth human seed.
So soon as, thus dislodged, it has retired
From its abodes throughout the limbs and frame,
It withdraws from the whole body, and assembling
At certain places in the system, straightway
Rouses at last the body's genital parts.
These places, irritated, swell with seed;
And so the wish arises to eject it
Towards that whereto the fell desire tends;
While the body seeks that by which the mind

Is smitten by love. For all men generally
Fall towards the wound, and the blood glistens forth
In that direction whence the stroke was dealt us.
And if he is at close quarters, the red drops
Sprinkle the foe. Thus he who has been struck
By the missiles of Venus, whether a boy
With womanish limbs launches the shaft, or else
Some woman darting love from her whole body,
Yearns towards that whereby he has been wounded,
And longs to unite with it, and shoot the stream
Drawn from the one into the other body.
For dumb desire gives presage of the pleasure.

This desire we call Venus : from it came
The Latin name for love [1] ; and from this source
There trickled first into the heart that drop
Of Venus' honeyed sweetness, followed soon
By chilling care. For though that which you love
Be absent, yet are images of it present,
And its sweet name still haunts within your ears.
But it is wise to shun such images,
And scare off from you all that feeds your love,
Turning your mind elsewhere, and vent instead
Your gathering humours on some other body,
Rather than hold them back, set once for all
Upon the love of one, and so lay up
Care and unfailing anguish for yourself.
For the wound gathers strength and grows inveterate
By feeding, while the madness day by day
Increases, and the misery becomes heavier,
Unless you heal the first wounds by new blows,
And roving in the steps of vagrant Venus
So cure them while yet fresh, or can divert
To something else the movements of your mind.

[1] Cupido.

Nor does the man who shuns love go without
The fruits of Venus ; rather he makes choice
Of joys that bring no after-pain : for surely
The pleasure of intercourse must be more pure
For those that are heart-whole than for the love-sick.
For in the very moment of possession
The passion of lovers fluctuates to and fro,
Wandering undecidedly, nor know they
What first they would enjoy with eyes and hands.
What they have sought, they tightly press, and cause
Pain to the body, and often print their teeth
Upon the lips, and kiss with bruising mouths,
Because the pleasure is not unalloyed,
And there are secret stings which stimulate
To hurt that very thing, whate'er it be,
From which those germs of madness emanate.
But easily, while love lasts, Venus allays
Such pains ; and soft delight, mingled therein,
Bridles their bites. For in this there is hope
That from that very body whence proceeds
Their burning lust, the flame may in turn be quenched,
Although Nature protests the opposite
Must happen, since this is the one sole thing
Whereof the more we have, so much the more
Must the heart be consumed by fell desire.
For food and drink are taken within the body ;
And since they are wont to settle in fixed parts,
In this way the desire for water and bread
Is easily satisfied : but from the face
And beautiful colouring of a man there enters
Nothing into the body to enjoy
Save tenuous images, a love-sick hope
Often snatched off by the wind. As when in sleep
A thirsty man seeks to drink, and no liquid
Is given to quench the burning in his limbs,
Yet he pursues the images of water,
Toiling in vain, and still thirsts, though he drink

In a rushing river's midst; even so in love
Venus deludes lovers with images:
For neither, gaze intently as they may,
Can bodies satiate them, nor with their hands
Can they pluck anything off from the soft limbs,
Aimlessly wandering over the whole body.
And when at last with limbs knit they enjoy
The flower of their age, when now the body
Presages rapture, and Venus is in act
To sow the fields of woman, eagerly
They clasp bodies and join moist mouth to mouth
With panted breath, imprinting lips with teeth;
In vain, for naught thence can they pluck away,
Nor each with the whole body entering pass
Into the other's body; for at times
They seem to wish and struggle so to do.
So greedily do they hug the bonds of Venus,
While their limbs melt, enfeebled by the might
Of pleasure. Finally, when the gathered lust
Has burst forth from the frame, awhile there comes
A brief pause in their passion's violent heat.
Then returns the same madness: the old frenzy
Revisits them, when they would fain discover
What verily they desire to attain;
Yet never can they find out what device
May conquer their disease: in such blind doubt
They waste away, pined by a secret wound.

Consider too how they consume their strength
And are worn out with toiling; and consider
How at another's beck their life is passed.
Meantime their substance vanishes and is changed
To Babylonian stuffs; their duties languish;
Their reputation totters and grows sick.
While at her lover's cost she anoints herself
With precious unguents, and upon her feet
Beautiful Sicyonian slippers laugh.

Then doubtless she has set for her in gold
Big green-lit emeralds ; and the sea-purple dress,
Worn out by constant use, imbibes the sweat
Of love's encounters. The wealth which their fathers
Had nobly gathered, becomes hair-ribbons
And head-dresses, or else may be is turned
Into a long Greek gown, or stuffs of Alinda
And Ceos. Feasts with goodly broideries
And viands are prepared, games, numerous cups,
Unguents, crowns and festoons ; but all in vain ;
Since from the well-spring of delights some touch
Of bitter rises, to give pain amidst
The very flowers ; either when the mind
Perchance grows conscience-stricken, and remorse
Gnaws it, thus to be spending a life of sloth,
And ruining itself in wanton haunts ;
Or else because she has launched forth some word
And left its sense in doubt, some word that clings
To the hungry heart, and quickens there like fire ;
Or that he fancies she is casting round
Her eyes too freely, or looks upon some other,
And on her face sees traces of a smile.

When love is permanent and fully prosperous,
These evils are experienced ; but if love
Be crossed and hopeless, there are evils such
That you might apprehend them with closed eyes,
Beyond numbering ; so that it is wiser,
As I have taught you, to be vigilant
Beforehand, and watch well lest you be snared.
For to avoid being tripped up in love's toils
Is not so difficult as, once you are caught,
To issue from the nets and to break through
The strong meshes of Venus. None the less
Even when you are tangled and involved,
You may escape the peril, unless you stand
In your own way, and always overlook

Every defect whether of mind or body
In her whom your pursue and long to win.
For this is how men generally behave
Blinded by lust, and assign to those they love
Good qualities which are not truly theirs.
So we see women in various ways misformed
And ugly, to be fondly loved and held
In highest favour. And a man will mock
His fellows, urging them to placate Venus,
Because they are troubled by a degrading love,
Yet often the poor fool will have no eyes
For his own far worse plight. The tawny is called
A honey brown ; the filthy and unclean,
Reckless of order ; the green-eyed, a Pallas ;
The sinewy and angular, a gazelle ;
The tiny and dwarfish is a very Grace,
Nothing but sparkle ; the monstrous and ungainly,
A marvel, and composed of majesty.
She stammers, cannot talk, why then she lisps ;
The mute is bashful ; but the fiery-tongued
Malicious gossip becomes a brilliant torch.
One is a slender darling, when she scarce
Can live for lack of flesh ; and one half dead
With cough, is merely frail and delicate.
Then the fat and full-bosomed is Ceres' self
Suckling Iacchus ; the snub-nosed, a female
Silenus, or a Satyress ; the thick-lipped,
A kiss incarnate. But more of this sort
It were a tedious labour to recite.
Yet be she noble of feature as you will,
And let the might of Venus emanate
From every limb ; still there are others too ;
Still we have lived without her until now ;
Still she does, and we know she does, the same
In all things as the ugly, and, poor wretch,
Perfumes herself with evil-smelling scents,
While her maids run and hide to giggle in secret.

But the excluded lover many a time
With flowers and garlands covers tearfully
The threshold, and anoints the haughty posts
With oil of marjoram, and imprints, poor man,
Kisses upon the doors. Yet when at last
He has been admitted, if but a single breath
Should meet him as he enters, he would seek
Specious excuses to be gone, and so
The long-studied, deep-drawn complaint would fall
To the ground, and he would then convict himself
Of folly, now he sees he had attributed
More to her than is right to grant a mortal.
Nor to our Venuses is this unknown :
Wherefore the more are they at pains to hide
All that takes place behind the scenes of life
From those they would keep fettered in love's chains ;
But all in vain, since in imagination
You yet may draw forth all these things to light,
Discovering every cause for ridicule :
And if she be of a mind that still can charm,
And not malicious, you may in your turn
Overlook faults and pardon human frailty.

Nor always with feigned love does the woman sigh,
When with her own uniting the man's body
She holds him clasped, with moistened kisses sucking
His lips into her lips. Nay, from the heart
She often does it, and seeking mutual joys
Woos him to run to the utmost goal of love.
And nowise else could birds, cattle, wild beasts,
And sheep and mares submit to males, except
That their exuberant nature is in heat,
And burning draws towards them joyously
The lust of the covering mates. See you not also
That those whom mutual pleasure has enchained
Are often tormented in their common chains ?
How often on the highroads dogs desiring

To separate, will strain in opposite ways
Eagerly with all their might, yet the whole time
They are held fast in the strong bonds of Venus!
Thus they would never act, unless they had
Experience of mutual joys, enough
To thrust them into the snare and hold them bound.
Therefore I assert, the pleasure must be common.

Often when, mingling her seed with the man's,
The woman with sudden force has overwhelmed
And mastered the man's force, then children are
borne
Like to the mother from the mother's seed,
As from the father's seed like to the father.
But those whom you see sharing the form of both,
Mingling their parents' features side by side,
Grow from the father's body and mother's blood,
When mutual ardour has conspired to fling
The seeds together, roused by the goads of Venus
Throughout the frame, and neither of the two
Has gained the mastery nor yet been mastered.
Moreover sometimes children may be born
Like their grandparents, and will often recall
The forms of their remoter ancestors,
Because the parents often hold concealed
Within their bodies many primal atoms
Mingled in many ways, which, handed down
From the first stock, father transmits to father.
And out of these Venus produces forms
With ever-varying chances, and recalls
The look and voice and hair of ancestors:
Since truly these things are no more derived
From a determined seed, than are our faces
Bodies and limbs. Also the female sex
May spring from a father's seed, and males come
forth
Formed from a mother's body: for the birth

Is always fashioned out of the two seeds.
Whichever of the two that which is born
Is most like, of that parent it will have
More than an equal share ; as you may observe,
Whether it be a male or female offspring.

Nor do divine powers thwart in any man
A fruitful sowing, so that he may never
Receive from sweet children the name of father,
But in sterile wedlock must live out his days ;
As men in general fancy, and so sprinkle
The altars sorrowfully with much blood,
And heap the shrine-tables with offerings,
To make their wives pregnant with copious seed.
But vainly they importune the divinity
And sortilege of the gods. For they are sterile
Sometimes from too great thickness of the seed,
Or else it is unduly thin and fluid.
Because the thin cannot adhere and cleave
To the right spots, it forthwith flows away
Defeated, and departs abortively.
Others again discharge a seed too thick,
More solid than is suitable, which either
Does not shoot forth with so far-flung a stroke,
Or cannot so well penetrate where it should,
Or having penetrated, does not easily
Mix with the woman's seed. For harmonies
Seem to be most important in love's rites.
And some men will more readily fertilise
Some women, and other women will conceive
More readily and grow pregnant from other men.
And many women, sterile hitherto
In several marriages, have yet at last
Found mates from whom they could conceive children,
And so become enriched with a sweet offspring.
And even for those to whom their household wives,

However fruitful, had failed so far to bear,
A well-matched nature has been often found
That they might fortify their age with children.
So important is it, if seeds are to agree
And blend with seeds for purposes of birth,
Whether the thick encounters with the fluid,
And the fluid with the thick. Also herein
It is of moment on what diet life
Is nourished; for the seed within the limbs
By some foods is made solid, and by others
Is thinned and dwindled. Also in what modes
Love's bland delight is dealt with, that likewise
Is of the highest moment. For in general
Women are thought more readily to conceive
After the manner of wild beasts and quadrupeds,
Since so the seeds can find the proper spots,
The breasts being bent downward, the loins raised.
Nor have wives the least need of wanton movements.
For a woman thwarts conception and frustrates it,
If with her loins she joyously lures on
The man's love, and, with her whole bosom relaxed
And limp, provokes lust's tide to overflow.
For then she thrusts the furrow from the share's
Direct path, turning the seed's stroke aside
From its right goal. And thus for their own ends
Harlots are wont to move, because they wish
Not to conceive nor lie in childbed often,
Likewise that Venus may give men more pleasure.
But of this surely our wives should have no need.

Sometimes, by no divine interposition
Nor through the shafts of Venus, a plain woman,
Though of inferior beauty, may be loved.
For sometimes she herself by her behaviour,
Her gentle ways and personal daintiness
Will easily accustom you to spend
Your whole life with her. And indeed 'tis custom

That harmonises love. For what is struck
However lightly by repeated blows,
Yet after a long lapse of time is conquered
And must dissolve. Do you not likewise see
That drops of water falling upon stones
After long lapse of time will pierce them through ?

BOOK V

Who is there that by energy of mind
Could build a poem worthy of our theme's
Majesty and of these discoveries ?
Or who has such a mastery of words
As to devise praises proportionate
To his deserts, who to us has bequeathed
Such prizes, earned by his own intellect ?
No man, I think, formed of a mortal body.
For if we are to speak as the acknowledged
Majesty of our theme demands, a god
Was he, most noble Memmius, a god,
Who first found out that discipline of life
Which now is called philosophy, and whose skill
From such great billows and a gloom so dark
Delivered life, and steered it into a calm
So peaceful and beneath so bright a light.
For compare the divine discoveries
Of others in old times. 'Tis told that Ceres
First revealed corn to men, Liber the juice
Of grape-born wine ; though life without these things
Might well have been sustained ; and even now
'Tis said there are some people that live so.
But to live happily was not possible
Without a serene mind. Therefore more justly
Is this man deemed by us a god, from whom
Came those sweet solaces of life, which now
Already through great nations spread abroad
Have power to soothe men's minds. Should you suppose
Moreover that the deeds of Hercules
Surpass his, then yet further will you drift
Out of true reason's course. For what harm now

Would those great gaping jaws of Nemea's lion
Do to us, and the bristly Arcadian boar ?
What could the bull of Crete, or Lerna's pest
The Hydra fenced around with venomous snakes,
And threefold Gerion's triple-breasted might,
Or those brazen-plumed birds inhabiting
Stymphalian swamps, what injury so great
Could they inflict upon us, or the steeds
Of Thracian Diomede, with fire-breathing nostrils
Ranging Bistonia's wilds and Ismarus ?
Also the serpent, guardian of the bright
Gold-gleaming apples of the Hesperides,
Fierce and grim-glancing, with huge body coiled
Round the tree's stem, how were it possible
He could molest us by the Atlantic shore
And those lone seas, where none of us sets foot,
And no barbarian ventures to draw near ?
And all those other monsters which likewise
Have been destroyed, if they had not been vanquished,
What harm, pray, could they do, though now alive ?
None, I presume : for the earth even now abounds
With wild beasts to repletion, and is filled
With shuddering terror throughout its woods, great
mountains
And deep forests, regions which we have power
For the most part to avoid. But if the heart
Has not been purged, what tumults then, what dangers
Must needs invade us in our own despite !
What fierce anxieties, offspring of desire,
Rend the distracted man, what mastering fears !
Pride also, sordid avarice, and violence,
Of what calamities are not they the cause !
Luxury too, and slothfulness ! He therefore
Who could subdue all these, and banish them
Out of our minds by force of words, not arms,
Is it not right we should deem such a man
Worthy to be numbered among the gods ?

The more that he was wont in beautiful
And godlike speech to utter many truths
About the immortal gods themselves, and set
The whole nature of things in clear words forth.

I, in his footsteps treading, follow out
His reasonings and expound in my discourse
By what law all things are created, how
They are compelled to abide within that law,
Without power to annul the immutable
Decrees of time ; and first above all else
The mind's nature was found to be composed
Of a body that had birth, without the power
To endure through a long period unscathed :
For it was found to be mere images
That are wont to deceive the mind in sleep,
Whenever we appear to behold one
Whom life has abandoned. Now, for what remains,
The order of my argument has brought me
To the point where I must show both how the world
Is composed of a body which must die,
Also that it was born ; and in what way
Matter once congregating and uniting
Established earth sky sea, the stars, the sun,
And the moon's globe : also what living creatures
Rose from the earth, and which were those that never
At any time were born : next in what way
Mankind began to employ varied speech
One with another by giving names to things :
Then for what causes that fear of the gods
Entered their breasts, and now through the whole world
Gives sanctity to shrines, lakes and groves,
Altars and images of gods. Moreover
I will make plain by what force and control
Nature pilots the courses of the sun
And the wanderings of the moon, lest we perchance
Deem that they traverse of their own free will

Their yearly orbits between heaven and earth,
Obsequiously furthering the increase
Of crops and living things, or should suppose
That they roll onwards by the gods' design.
For those who have learnt rightly that the gods
Lead a life free from care, if yet they wonder
By what means all things can be carried on,
Such above all as are perceived to happen
In the ethereal regions overhead,
They are borne back again into their old
Religious fears, and adopt pitiless lords,
Whom in their misery they believe to be
Almighty; for they are ignorant of what can
And what cannot exist; in fine they know not
Upon what principle each thing has its powers
Limited, and its deep-set boundary stone.

But now, lest I detain you with more promises,
In the first place consider, Memmius,
The seas, the land, the sky, whose threefold nature,
Three bodies, three forms so dissimilar,
And three such wondrous textures, a single day
Shall give to destruction, and the world's vast mass
And fabric, for so many years upheld,
Shall fall to ruin. Nor am I unaware
How novel and strange, when first it strikes the mind,
Must appear this destruction of earth and heaven
That is to be, and for myself how difficult
It will prove to convince you by mere words,
As happens when one brings to a man's ears
Some notion unfamiliar hitherto,
If yet one cannot thrust it visibly
Beneath his eyes, or place it in his hands;
For the paved highway of belief through touch
And sight leads straightest into the human heart
And the precincts of the mind. Yet none the less
I will speak out. Reality itself

It may be will bring credence to my words,
And in a little while you will behold
The earth terribly quaking, and all things
Shattered to ruins. But may pilot fortune
Steer far from us such disaster, and may reason
Convince us rather than reality
That the whole universe may well collapse,
Tumbling together with a dread crash and roar.

But before I attempt concerning this
To announce fate's oracles in more holy wise,
And with assurance far more rational
Than doth the Pythoness, when from the tripod
And laurel wreath of Phoebus her voice sounds,
Many consolatories will I first
Expound to you in learned words, lest haply
Curbed by religion's bit you should suppose
That earth and sun and sky, sea, stars and moon,
Their substance being divine, must needs abide
Eternally, and should therefore think it just
That all, after the manner of the giants,
Should suffer penance for their monstrous guilt
Who by their reasoning shake the world's firm walls,
And fain would quench the glorious sun in heaven,
Shaming with mortal speech immortal things ;
Though in fact such objects are so far removed
From any share in divine energy,
And so unworthy to be accounted gods,
That they may be considered with more reason
To afford us the conception of what is quite
Devoid of vital motion and of sense.
For truly by no means can we suppose
That the nature and judgment of the mind
Can exist linked with every kind of body,
Even as in the sky trees cannot exist,
Nor clouds in the salt waters, nor can fish
Live in the fields, neither can blood be found

In wood, nor sap in stones : but where each thing
Can dwell and grow, is determined and ordained.
Even so the nature of mind cannot be born
Alone without a body, nor exist
Separated from sinews and from blood.
But if (for this is likelier by far)
The mind's force might reside within the head
Or shoulders, or be born down in the heels,
Or in any part you will, it would at least
Inhabit the same man and the same vessel.
But since even in our body it is seen
To be determined and ordained where soul
And mind can separately dwell and grow,
All the more must it be denied that mind
Cannot have being quite outside a body
And a living form, in crumbling clods of earth,
In the sun's fire, or water, or aloft
In the domains of ether. Such things therefore
Are not endowed with divine consciousness,
Because they cannot be quickened into life.

This too you cannot possibly believe,
That there are holy abodes of deities
Anywhere in the world. For so tenuous
Is the nature of gods, and from our senses
So far withdrawn, that hardly can the mind
Imagine it. And seeing that hitherto
It has eluded touch or blow of hands,
It must touch nothing which for us is tangible :
For naught can touch that may not itself be touched.
So even their abodes must be unlike
Our own, tenuous as their bodies are.
All this hereafter I will prove to you
By plentiful argument. Further, to say
That for the sake of mankind the gods willed
To frame the wondrous nature of the world,
And that on this account we ought to extol

Their handiwork as worthy of all praise,
And to believe that it will prove eternal
And indestructible, and to think it sin
Ever by any effort to disturb
What by the ancient wisdom of the gods
Has been established everlastingly
For mankind's benefit, or by argument
To assail and overthrow it utterly
From top to bottom, and to invent besides
Other such errors—all this, Memmius,
Is folly. For what advantage could our thanks
Bestow upon immortal and blessed beings
That for our sakes they should bestir themselves
To perform any task ? Or what new fact
Could have induced them, tranquil hitherto,
After so long to change their former life ?
For it seems fitting he should take delight
In a new state of things, to whom the old
Was painful : but for him whom in past times,
While he was living in felicity,
No evil had befallen, for such a one
What could have kindled a desire for change ?
Must we imagine that their life lay prostrate
In darkness and in misery, till the birth
And origin of things first dawned upon them ?
Besides, what evil had it been to us
Not to have been created ? For whoever
Has once been born, must wish to abide in life
So long as luring pleasure bids him stay :
But one who has never tasted the love of life,
Nor even been numbered in life's ranks, what harm
Were it for him not to have been created ?
Again whence first was implanted in the gods
A pattern for begetting things ? Whence too
The preconception of what men should be,
So that they knew and imaged in their minds
What they desired to make ? And by what means

Could they have ever ascertained the energy
Latent in primal atoms, or what forms
Might be produced by changes in their order,
Unless Nature herself had given them first
A sample of creation ? For indeed
These primal atoms in such multitudes
And in so many ways, through infinite time
Impelled by blows and moved by their own weight,
Have been borne onward so incessantly,
Uniting in every way and making trial
Of every shape they could combine to form,
That 'tis not strange if they have also fallen
Into such grouping, and acquired such motions
As those whereby the present sum of things
Is carried on and ceaselessly renewed.

But even were I ignorant how things
Were formed of primal elements, yet this
Would I have ventured to affirm, and prove
Not only from the system of the heavens,
But from much other evidence, that nature
Has by no means been fashioned for our benefit
By divine power ; so great are the defects
Which are its bane. First, of the whole space
Covered by the enormous reach of heaven,
A greedy portion mountains occupy
And forests of wild beasts ; rocks and waste swamps
Possess it, or the wide land-sundering sea.
Besides, well nigh two-thirds are stolen from men
By burning heat and frost ceaselessly falling.
All that is left for husbandry, even that
The force of Nature soon would overspread
With thorns, unless resisted by man's force,
Ever wont for his livelihood to groan
Over the strong hoe, and with down-pressed plough
To cleave the earth. For if we do not turn
The fertile clods with coulters, and subduing

The soil of earth, summon the crops to birth,
They could not of their own accord spring up
Into the bright air. Even then sometimes,
When answering our long toil throughout the land
Every bud puts forth its leaves and flowers,
Either the sun in heaven scorches them
With too much heat, or sudden gusts of rain
Or nipping frosts destroy them, or wind-storms
Shatter them with impetuous whirling blasts.
Furthermore why does Nature multiply
And nourish terrible tribes of savage beasts
By land and sea, dangerous to mankind ?
Why does untimely death range to and fro ?
Then again, like a mariner cast ashore
By raging waves, the human infant lies
Naked upon the ground, speechless, in want
Of every help needful for life, when first
Nature by birth-throes from his mother's womb
Thrusts him into the borders of the light,
So that he fills the room with piteous wailing,
As well he may, whose fate in life will be
To pass through so much misery. But flocks
And herds of divers kind, and the wild beasts,
These, as they grow up, have no need of rattles :
To none of them a foster-nurse must utter
Fond broken speech : they seek not different dresses
To suit each season : no, nor do they need
Weapons nor lofty walls whereby to guard
What is their own, since all things for them all
The Earth herself brings forth abundantly,
And Nature, the creatress manifold.

First of all, since the substance of the earth,
Moisture, and the light breathings of the air,
And burning heats, of which this sum of things
Is seen to be composed, have all been formed
Of a body that was born and that will die,

Of such a body must we likewise deem
That the whole nature of the world was made.
For things whose parts and members we see formed
Of a body that had birth and shapes that die,
These we perceive are themselves always mortal,
And likewise have been born. Since then we see
That the chief parts and members of the world
Decay and are reborn, it is no less certain
That once for heaven and earth there was a time
Of origin, and will be of destruction.

Herein lest you should think that without proof
I have seized this vantage, in that I have assumed
Earth and fire to be mortal, and have not doubted
That moisture and air perish, but maintained
That these too are reborn and grow afresh,
Consider first how no small part of the earth
Ceaselessly baked by the sun's rays and trampled
By innumerable feet, gives off a mist
And flying clouds of dust, which the strong winds
Disperse through the whole atmosphere. Part too
Of the earth's soil is turned to swamp by rains,
While scouring rivers gnaw their banks away.
Furthermore whatsoever goes to augment
Some other thing, is in its turn restored ;
And since beyond all doubt the all-mother Earth
Is seen to be no less the general tomb,
You thus may see how she is ever lessened,
Yet with new growth increases evermore.

Next, that the sea, the rivers and the springs
Are always amply fed by new supplies
Of moisture oozing up perennially,
It needs no words to explain. The vast down-flow
Of waters from all sides is proof of this.
But as the water that is uppermost
Is always taken away, it comes to pass

That on the whole there is no overflow ;
Partly because strong winds, sweeping the seas,
Diminish them, and the sun in heaven unweaves
Their fabric with his rays ; partly because
The water is distributed below
Throughout all lands. For the salt is strained off,
And the pure fluid matter, oozing back,
Gathers together at the river-heads,
Thence in fresh current streams over the land,
Wherever it finds a channel ready scooped
To carry down its waves with liquid foot.

Now must I speak of air, which every hour
Is changed through its whole body in countless ways.
For always whatsoever flows from things
Is all borne into the vast sea of air :
And if it were not in its turn to give
Particles back to things, recruiting them
As they dissolve, all would have been long since
Disintegrated, and so changed to air.
Therefore it never ceases to be born
Out of things, and to pass back into things,
Since, as we know, all are in constant flux.

Likewise that bounteous fountain of clear light,
The sun in heaven, ceaselessly floods the sky
With fresh brightness, and momently supplies
The place of light with new light : for each former
Emission of his radiance perishes,
On whatsoever spot it falls. This truth
You may thus learn. So soon as clouds begin
To pass below the sun, and as it were
To break off the light's rays, their lower part
Forthwith perishes wholly, and the earth
Is shadow-swept, wherever the clouds move.
Thus you may know that things have ever need
Of fresh illumination, and that each

Former discharge of radiance perishes,
Nor in any other way could things be seen
In sunlight, if the fountain-head itself
Did not send forth a perpetual supply.
Also those lights we use here upon earth
At night-time, hanging lamps, and torches bright
With darting beams, rich with abundant smoke,
Are in haste in like fashion to supply
New radiance with ministering fire;
The very flames seem eager, eager to flicker;
Nor does the still unbroken stream of light
One instant quit the spots whereon it played,
So suddenly is its perishing concealed
By the swift birth of flame from all these fires.
It is thus then you must think sun moon and stars
Shoot forth their light from ever fresh supplies,
And that they always lose whatever beams
Come foremost; lest perchance you should believe
Their energy to be indestructible.

Again, is it not seen that even stones
By time are vanquished, that tall towers fall
And rocks crumble away, that shrines and idols
Of gods grow worn out and dilapidate,
Nor may the indwelling holiness prolong
The bounds of destiny, or strive against
The laws of Nature? Then do we not see
The monuments of men, fallen to ruin,
Ask for themselves whether you would believe
That they also grow old?[1] See we not rocks
Split off from mountain heights fall crashing down
Unable more to endure the powerful stress
Of finite years? Surely they would not fall
Thus suddenly split off, if through the lapse
Of infinite past years they had withstood
All the assaults of time, without being shattered.

[1] The text is corrupt and the meaning obscure.

Now contemplate that which around and above
Compasses the whole earth with its embrace.
If it begets all things out of itself,
As some have told us, and receives them back
When they have perished, then the whole sky is made
Of a body that had birth and that must die.
For whatsoever nourishes and augments
Other things from itself, must needs be minished,
And be replenished, when it receives them back.

Moreover, if there never was a time
Of origin when earth and heaven were born,
If they have always been from everlasting,
Why then before the Theban war and Troy's
Destruction, have not other poets sung
Of other deeds as well ? Whither have vanished
So many exploits of so many men ?
Why are they nowhere blossoming engrafted
On the eternal monuments of fame ?
But in truth, as I think, this sum of things
Is in its youth : the nature of the world
Is recent, and began not long ago.
Wherefore even now some arts are being wrought
To their last polish, some are still in growth.
Of late many improvements have been made
In navigation, and musicians too
Have given birth to new melodious sounds.
Also this theory of the nature of things
Has been discovered lately, and I myself
Have only now been found the very first
Able to turn it into our native words.
Nevertheless, if you perchance believe
That long ago these things were just the same,
But that the generations of mankind
Perished by scorching heat, or that their cities
Fell in some great convulsion of the world,
Or else that flooded by incessant rains

Devouring rivers broke forth over the earth
And swallowed up whole towns, so much the more
Must you admit that there will come to pass
A like destruction of earth and heaven too.
For when things were assailed by such great maladies
And dangers, if some yet more fatal cause
Had whelmed them, they would then have been dissolved
In havoc and vast ruin far and wide.
And in no other way do we perceive
That we are mortal, save that we all alike
In turn fall sick of the same maladies
As those whom Nature has withdrawn from life.

Again, whatever things abide eternally,
Must either, because they are of solid body,
Repulse assaults, nor suffer anything
To penetrate them, which might have the power
To disunite the close-locked parts within :
(Such are those bodies whereof matter is made,
Whose nature we have shown before :) or else
They must be able to endure throughout
All time, because they are exempt from blows,
As void is, which abides untouched, nor suffers
One whit from any stroke : or else because
There is no further space surrounding them,
Into which things might as it were depart
And be dissolved ; even as the sum of sums
Is eternal, nor is there any space
Outside it, into which its particles
Might spring asunder, nor are there other bodies
That could strike and dissolve them with strong blows.
But neither, as I have shown, is this world's nature
Solid, since there is void mixed up in things ;
Nor yet is it like void ; nor verily
Are atoms lacking that might well collect
Out of the infinite, and overwhelm
This sum of things with violent hurricane,

Or threaten it with some other form of ruin ;
Nor further is there any want of room
And of deep space, into which the world's walls
Might be dispersed abroad ; or they may perish
Shattered by any other force you will.
Therefore the gates of death are never closed
Against sky, sun or earth, or the deep seas ;
But they stand open, awaiting them with huge
Vast-gaping jaws. So you must needs admit
That all these likewise once were born : for things
Of mortal body could not until now
Through infinite past ages have defied
The strong powers of immeasurable time.

Again, since the chief members of the world
So mightily contend together, stirred
By unhallowed civil warfare, see you not
That some end may be set to their long strife ?
It may be when the sun and every kind
Of heat shall have drunk all the moisture up,
And gained the mastery they were struggling for,
Though they have failed as yet to achieve their aim :
So vast are the supplies the rivers bring,
Threatening in turn to deluge every land
From out the deep abysses of the ocean ;
All in vain, since the winds, sweeping the seas,
Diminish them, and the sun in heaven unweaves
Their fabric with his rays ; and 'tis their boast
That they are able to dry all things up,
Before moisture can achieve its end.
So terrible a war do they breathe out
On equal terms, striving one with another
For mighty issues : though indeed fire once
Obtained the mastery, so the fable tells,
And water once reigned supreme in the fields.
For fire prevailing licked up and consumed
Many things, when the ungovernable might

Of the Sun's horses, swerving from their course,
Through the whole sky and over every land
Whirled Phaëthon. But then the almighty Father,
Stirred to fierce wrath, with sudden thunder-stroke
Dashed great-souled Phaëthon from his team to the earth,
And as he fell the Sun-god meeting him
Caught from him the world's everlasting lamp,
And brought back tamed and trembling to the yoke
The scattered steeds ; then on their wonted course
Guiding them, unto all things gave fresh life.
Thus verily the old Greek poets sang,
Though straying from true reason all too far.
For fire can only gain the mastery
When an excess of fiery particles
Have flocked together out of infinite space ;
And then its strength fails, vanquished in some way,
Or else things perish, utterly consumed
By scorching gusts. Likewise moisture once
Gathering together, as the story tells,
Strove for the mastery, when it overwhelmed
Many cities of mankind. But afterwards,
When all that force, which out of infinite space
Had gathered itself up, was by some means
Diverted and withdrew, the rains ceased then,
And the violence of the rivers was abated.

But in what ways matter converging once
Established earth and heaven and the sea's deeps,
The sun's course and the moon's, I will set forth
In order. For in truth not by design
Did the primordial particles of things
Arrange themselves each in its own right place
With provident mind, nor verily have they bargained
What motions each should follow ; but because
These primal atoms in such multitudes
And in so many ways through infinite time
Impelled by blows and moved by their own weight,

Have been borne onward so incessantly,
Uniting in every way and making trial
Of every shape they could combine to form,
Therefore it is that after wandering wide
Through vast periods, attempting every kind
Of union and of motion, they at last
Collect into such groups as, suddenly
Flocking together, oftentimes become
The rudiments of mighty things, of earth,
Sea and sky, and the race of living creatures.

At that time neither could the disk of the sun
Be seen flying aloft with bounteous light,
Nor the stars of great heaven, nor sea, nor sky,
Nor yet earth nor the air, nor anything
Resembling those things which we now behold,
But only a sort of strange tempest, a mass
Gathered together out of primal atoms
Of all kinds, which discordantly waged war
Disordering so their interspaces, paths,
Connections, weights, collisions, meetings, motions,
Since with their unlike forms and varied shapes,
They could not therefore all remain united,
Nor move among themselves harmoniously.
Thereupon parts began to fly asunder,
And like things to unite with like, and so
To separate off the world, and to divide
Its members, portioning out its mighty parts;
That is, to mark off the high heaven from earth,
And the sea by itself, that it might spread
With unmixed waters, and likewise the fires
Of aether by themselves, pure and unmixed.

Now first the several particles of earth,
Since they were heavy and close-packed, all met
Together in the middle, and took up
The lowest places: and the more they met

In close-packed throngs, the more did they squeeze out
Those particles which were to form sea, stars,
Sun and moon, and the walls of the great world.
For all these are of smoother rounder seeds,
And of much smaller elements than earth.
So first through porous openings in the soil
The fire-laden aether here and there
Bursting forth rose and lightly carried off
Many fires with it, much in the same way
As often we may see when first the beams
Of the radiant sun with golden morning light
Blush through the grasses gemmed with dew, and lakes
And ever-flowing rivers exhale mist,
While earth itself is sometimes seen to smoke ;
And when floating aloft these vapours all
Unite on high, then taking bodily shape
As clouds, they weave a veil beneath the heavens.
Thus then the light diffusive aether once
Took bodily shape, and, arched round on all sides,
Far into every quarter spreading out,
So with its greedy embrace hemmed in all else.
Next came the rudiments of sun and moon,
Whose globes turn in the air midway between
Aether and earth ; for neither did the earth
Nor the great aether claim them for itself,
Since they were not so heavy as to sink
And settle down, nor so light as to glide
Along the topmost borders : yet their course
Between the two is such, that as they roll
Their lifelike bodies onward, they are still
Parts of the whole world ; even as with us
Some of our members may remain at rest,
While at the same time others may be in motion.
So when these things had been withdrawn, the earth,
Where now the ocean's vast blue region spreads,
Sank suddenly down, and flooded with salt surge
Its hollow parts. And day by day the more

The encircling aether's heats and the sun's rays
Compressed the earth into a closer mass
By constant blows upon its outer surface
From every side, so that thus beaten upon
It shrank and drew together round its centre,
The more did the salt sweat squeezed from its body
Increase by its oozings the sea's floating plains,
And the more did those many particles
Of heat and air escaping fly abroad,
And far away from the earth condensing, form
The lofty glittering mansions of the sky.
The plains sank lower, the high mountains grew
Yet steeper; for the rocks could not sink down,
Nor could all parts subside to one same level.

Thus then the earth's ponderous mass was formed
With close-packed body, and all the slime of the world
Slid to the lowest plane by its own weight,
And at the bottom settled down like dregs.
Then the sea, then the air, then the fire-laden
Aether itself, all these were now left pure
With liquid bodies. Some indeed are lighter
Than others, and most liquid and light of all
Over the airy currents aether floats,
Not blending with the turbulent atmosphere
Its liquid substance. All below, it suffers
To be embroiled by violent hurricanes,
Suffers all to be tossed with wayward storms,
While itself gliding on with changeless sweep
Bears its own fires along. For, that the aether
May stream on steadily with one impulse,
The Pontos demonstrates, that sea which streams
With an unchanging tide, unceasingly
Preserving as it glides one constant pace.

Now let us sing what cause could set the stars
In motion. First, if the great globe of heaven

Revolves, then we must needs maintain that air
Presses upon the axis at each end,
And holds it from outside, closing it in
At both poles ; also that there streams above
Another current, moving the same way,
In which the stars of the eternal world
Roll glittering onward ; or else that beneath
There is another stream, that drives the sphere
Upwards the opposite way, just as we see
Rivers turn mill-wheels with their water-scoops.
It likewise may well be that the whole sky
Remains at rest, yet that the shining signs
Are carried onwards ; either because within them
Are shut swift tides of aether, that whirl round
Seeking a way out, and so roll their fires
On all sides through the sky's nocturnal mansions ;
Or else that from some other source outside
An air-stream whirls and drives the fires along ;
Or else they may be gliding of themselves,
Moving whithersoever the food of each
Calls and invites them, nourishing everywhere
Their flaming bodies throughout the whole sky.
For it is hard to affirm with certainty
Which of these causes operates in this world :
But what throughout the universe both can
And does take place in various worlds, created
On various plans, this I teach, and proceed
To expound what divers causes may exist
Through the universe for the motion of the stars :
And one of these in our world too must be
The cause which to the heavenly signs imparts
Their motive vigour : but dogmatically
To assert which this may be, is in no wise
The function of those advancing step by step.

Now in order that the earth should be at rest
In the world's midst, it would seem probable

That its weight gradually diminishing
Should disappear, and that the earth should have
Another nature underneath, conjoined
And blent in union from its earliest age
With those aerial portions of the world
Wherein it lives embodied. For this cause
It is no burden, nor weighs down the air,
Just as to a man his own limbs are no weight,
Nor is the head a burden to the neck,
Nor do we feel that the whole body's weight
Rests on the feet: yet a much smaller burden
Laid on us from outside, will often hurt us.
Of such great moment is it what each thing's
Function may be. Thus then the earth is not
An alien body intruded suddenly,
Nor thrust from elsewhere into an alien air,
But was conceived together with the world
At its first birth as a fixed portion of it,
Just as our limbs are seen to be of us.
Moreover the earth, when shaken suddenly
With violent thunder, by its trembling shakes
All that is over it; which in no wise
Could happen, if it were not closely bound
With the world's airy parts, and with the sky.
For they all, as though by common roots, cohere
One with another, from their earliest age
Conjoined and blent in union. See you not too
That heavy as our body's weight may be,
Yet the soul's force, though subtle exceedingly,
Sustains it, being so closely joined and blent
In union with it? Also what has power
To lift the body with a nimble leap,
Except the mind's force that controls the limbs?
Do you not now perceive how great the power
May be of a subtle nature, when 'tis joined
With a heavy body, even as with the earth
The air is joined, and the mind's force with us?

Also the sun's disk cannot be much larger,
Nor its heat be much less, than to our sense
They appear to be. For from whatever distance
Fires can fling light, and breathe upon our limbs
Their warming heat, these intervening spaces
Take away nothing from the body of flame;
The fire is not shrunken visibly.
So since the sun's heat and the light it sheds
Both reach our senses and caress our limbs,
The form also and contour of the sun
Must needs be seen from the earth in their true scale,
With neither addition nor diminishment.
Also the moon, whether it moves along
Illuminating earth with borrowed light,
Or throws out its own rays from its own body,
Howe'er that be, moves with a shape no larger
Than seems that shape which our eyes contemplate.
For all things which we look at from far off
Through much air, seem to our vision to grow dim
Before their contours lessen. Therefore the moon,
Seeing that it presents a clear aspect
And definite shape, must needs by us on earth
Be seen on high in its defining outline
Just as it is, and of its actual size.
Lastly consider all those fires of aether
You see from the earth. Since fires, which here below
We observe, for so long as their flickering
Remains distinct, and their heat is perceived,
Are sometimes seen to change their size to less
Or greater to some very slight extent
According to their distance, you may thence
Know that the fires of aether can be smaller
Only by infinitesimal degrees,
Or larger by the tiniest minute fraction.

This also is not wonderful, how the sun
Small as it is, can shed so great a light,

As with its flood to fill all seas and lands
And sky, with warm heat bathing everything.
For from this spot perhaps a single well
For the whole world may open and gush out,
Shooting forth an abundant stream of light,
Because from everywhere throughout the world
In such wise do the particles of heat
Gather together, and their united mass
Converges in such wise, that blazing fire
Streams forth here from a single fountain-head.
See you not too how wide a meadow-land
One little spring of water sometimes floods,
Overflowing whole fields ? It may be also
That from the sun's flame, though it be not great,
Heat pervades the whole air with scorching fires,
Should the air chance to be susceptible
And ready to be kindled, when it is struck
By tiny heat-rays. Then we sometimes see
A wide-spread conflagration from one spark
Catch fields of corn or stubble. Perhaps too
The sun shining on high with ruddy torch
May be surrounded by much fire and heats
Invisible, fire which no radiance
Reveals, but laden with heat it does no more
Than reinforce the stroke of the sun's rays.

Nor is there any single theory,
Certain and obvious, of how the sun
Out of his summer stations passing forth
Approaches the midwinter turning-point
Of Capricorn, and how coming back thence
He bends his course to the solstitial goal
Of Cancer ; then too how the moon is seen
To traverse every month that space, whereon
The journeying sun spends a year's period.
For these events, I say, no single cause
Can be assigned. It seems most probable

That the august opinion of Democritus
Should be the truth ; the nearer to the earth
The several constellations move, the less
Can they be borne on with the whirl of heaven :
For in the lower portions of this whirl
He says its speed and energy diminish
And disappear ; so that little by little
The sun is outstripped by the signs that follow,
Since he is far beneath the burning stars.
And the moon, so he says, more than the sun.
The lower and the further from the sky
Her course is, and the nearer to the earth,
The less can she keep even with the signs.
For the more languid is the whirl whereby
She is borne along, being lower than the sun,
The more do all the signs around her path
Overtake and pass by her. Thus it is
That she seems to move backward to each sign
More quickly, because the signs come up to her.
It may be also that two streams of air
Cross the sun's path at fixed times, each in turn
Flowing from opposite quarters of the world,
Whereof the first may thrust the sun away
Out of the summer signs, until he comes
To his winter turning-point and the icy frost ;
While the other from the freezing shades of cold
Sweeps him right back to the heat-laden regions
And the torrid constellations. And just so
We must suppose that the moon and the planets,
Which roll in their huge orbits through huge years,
May move on streams of air alternately
From opposite quarters. Do you not also see
How clouds are shifted by opposing winds,
The lower in directions contrary
To those above ? Why should not yonder stars
Be likewise carried by opposing currents
Upon their mighty orbits through the sky ?

But night covers the earth with vast darkness
Either when after his long course the sun
Has entered on the uttermost parts of heaven,
And now grown languid has breathed forth his fires,
Exhausted by their journey, and worn out
By traversing much air ; or else because
That same force which has borne his orb along
Above the earth, compels him now to turn
Backward his course and pass beneath the earth.

Likewise at a fixed time Matuta spreads
The rosy dawn abroad through the sky's borders,
And opens out her light ; either because
The same sun, travelling back below the earth,
Seizes the sky beforehand, and is fain
To kindle it with his rays ; or else because
Fires meet together, and many seeds of heat
Are wont at a fixed time to stream together
Causing new sunlight each day to be born.
Even so 'tis told that from the mountain heights
Of Ida at daybreak scattered fires are seen ;
These then unite as if into one globe
And make up the sun's orb. Nor yet herein
Should it cause wonder that these seeds of fire
Can stream together at a time so fixed,
Repairing thus the radiance of the sun.
For everywhere we see many events
Happening at fixed times. Thus trees both flower
And shed their blossoms at fixed times ; and age
At a time no less fixed bids the teeth drop,
And the boy clothe his features with the down
Of puberty, and let a soft beard fall
From either cheek. Lastly lightning and snow,
Rains, clouds and winds happen at more or less
Regular yearly seasons. For where causes
From the beginning have remained the same,
And things from the first origin of the world

Have so fallen out, they still repeat themselves
In regular sequence after a fixed order.

The cause too why days lengthen and nights wane,
While daylight shortens as the nights increase,
May either be because the same sun, journeying
Underneath and above the earth in curves
Of unlike length, parts the celestial regions
And into unequal halves divides his orbit:
Whatever he has subtracted from one half,
Just so much does he add, when he comes round,
On to the other half, till he has reached
That sign of heaven where the year's node makes
The night's shade equal to the light of day.
For in the sun's mid course between the blasts
Of south wind and of north, the heaven holds
His turning-points apart at distances
Now equalised, since such is the position
Of the whole starry circle, to glide through which
The sun takes up the period of a year,
Lighting the earth and sky with slanting rays,
As is shown by the arguments of those
Who have mapped out all the quarters of the sky,
Adorned with their twelve signs spaced out in order.
Or else because the air in certain parts
Is thicker, therefore the trembling lamp of fire
Is hindered in its course beneath the earth,
And cannot easily force a passage through
And emerge at the place where it should rise.
So in winter-time the nights are long and lingering,
Ere the day's radiant oriflamme comes forth.
Or else again those fires which cause the sun
To rise from a fixed point, for a like reason
Are wont to stream together slower or quicker
In alternating periods of the year.
So those would seem to speak the truth who hold
That every morning a new sun is born.

It may be the moon shines because she is struck
By the sun's rays, and turns towards our eyes
A larger portion of this light each day,
The further she recedes from the sun's orb,
Until over against him with full light
She has shone forth, and as she rises up
Has looked upon his setting from on high.
Thereafter in her gradual backward course
In the same manner she must hide her light,
The nearer she now glides to the sun's fire
Travelling through the circle of the signs
From an opposite direction : as those hold
Who fancy that the moon is like a ball,
And moves along a course below the sun.
It is also possible that she revolves
With her own light, and yet shows varying
Phases of brightness : for there may well be
Another body which glides on beside her,
Obstructing and occulting her continually,
And yet cannot be seen, because it moves
Without light. Or perhaps she may turn round
Like a ball, let us say, whose sphere is tinged
With glowing light over one-half its surface ;
And as she turns her sphere, she may present
Varying phases, till she has turned that side
Which glows with fire towards our gazing eyes ;
Then she twists gradually back once more
And hides the luminous half of her round ball :
As the Chaldean sages seek to prove,
Refuting with their Babylonian doctrine
The opposing science of the astronomers ;
Just as though what each sect is fighting for
Might not be true, or there were any reason
Why you should risk embracing the one creed
Less than the other. Again why every time
There should not be created a fresh moon,
With fixed succession of phases and fixed shapes,

So that each day this new-created moon
Would perish, and another in its stead
Be reproduced, this were no easy task
To prove by argument convincingly,
Since there can be so many things created
In fixed succession. Thus Spring goes its way,
And Venus, and the wingèd harbinger
Of Venus leads them on ; while treading close
On Zephyr's footsteps, mother Flora strews
The path before them, covering it all over
With every loveliest colour and rich scent.
Next in procession follows parching heat,
With dusty Ceres in its company,
And the Etesian blasts of the North winds.
After these Autumn comes, and by its side
Advances Euhius Euan,[1] following whom
The other Seasons with their winds appear,
Volturnus thundering on high, and Auster
Terrible with its lightnings. Then at length
December brings snow and renews numb frost.
Winter follows with teeth chattering for cold.
Wherefore it seems less wonderful that the moon
Should be begotten and destroyed again
At fixed times, seeing that so many things
Can come to pass at times so surely fixed.

Likewise the occultations of the sun
And the moon's vanishings you must suppose
May be produced by many different causes.
For why should the moon be able to shut out
The earth from the sun's light, and lift her head
On high to obstruct him from the earthward side,
Blocking his fiery beams with her dark orb,
And yet at the same time some other body
Gliding on without light continually
Should be supposed unable to do this ?

[1] Bacchus.

Why too should not the sun at a fixed time
Grow faint and lose his fires, and then again
Revive his light, when he has had to pass
Through tracts of air so hostile to his flames
That awhile his fires are quenched by them and perish ?
And why should the earth have power in turn to rob
The moon of light, and likewise keep the sun
Suppressed, while in her monthly course the moon
Glides through the clear-cut shadows of the cone,
And yet at the same time some other body
Should not have power to pass under the moon,
Or glide above the sun's orb, breaking off
The beams of light he sheds ? And furthermore,
If the moon shines with her own radiance,
Why in a certain region of the world
Might she not grow faint, while she makes her way
Through tracts that are unfriendly to her light ?

Now since I have demonstrated how each thing
Might come to pass throughout the azure spaces
Of the great heaven, how we may know what force
Can cause the varying motions of the sun,
And wanderings of the moon, and in what way
Their light being intercepted they might vanish
Covering with darkness the astonished earth,
When as it were they close their eye of light,
And opening it again, survey all places
Radiant with shining brightness,—therefore now
I will go back to the world's infancy
And the tender age of the world's fields, and show
What in their first fecundity they resolved
To raise into the borders of the light
And give in charge unto the wayward winds.

In the beginning the Earth brought forth all kinds
Of plants and growing verdure on hillsides
And over all the plains : the flowering meadows

Shone with green colour : next to the various trees
Was given a mighty emulous impulse
To shoot up into the air with unchecked growth.
As feathers, hairs and bristles first are born
On limbs of quadrupeds and on the bodies
Of winged fowl, so the new Earth then put forth
Grasses and brushwood first, and afterwards
Gave birth to all the breeds of mortal things,
That sprang up many in number, in many modes
And divers fashions. For no animals
Can have dropped from the sky, nor can land-creatures
Have issued from the salt pools. Hence it is
That with good reason the Earth has won the name
Of Mother, since from the Earth all things are born.
And many living creatures even now
Rise from the soil, formed by rains, and the sun's
Fierce heat. Therefore the less strange it appears
If then they arose more numerous and more large
Fostered by a new earth and atmosphere.
So first of all the varied families
And tribes of birds would leave their eggs, hatched out
In the spring season, as now the cicadas
In summer-time leave of their own accord
Their filmy skins in search of food and life.
Then was the time when first the Earth produced
The race of mortal men. For in the fields
Plenteous heat and moisture would abound,
So that wherever a fit place occurred,
Wombs would grow, fastened to the earth by roots :
And when the warmth of the infants in due time,
Avoiding moisture and demanding air,
Had broken these wombs open, then would Nature
Turn to that place the porous ducts of the Earth,
Compelling it to exude through open veins
A milk-like liquid, just as nowadays
After child-bearing every woman is filled
With sweet milk ; for with her too the whole flow

Of nutriment sets streaming towards her breasts.
Earth to these children furnished food, the heat
Clothing, the grass a bed, well lined with rich
Luxuriance of soft down. Moreover then
The world in its fresh newness would give rise
Neither to rigorous cold nor extreme heat,
Nor violent storms of wind, for in a like
Proportion all things grow and gather strength.

Therefore again and yet again I say
That with good reason the Earth has won and keeps
The name of Mother, since she of herself
Gave birth to humankind, and at a period
Well nigh determined shed forth every beast
That roams o'er the great mountains far and wide,
Likewise the birds of air, many in shape.
But because she must have some limit set
To her time of bearing, she ceased, like a woman
Worn out by lapse of years. For Time transforms
The whole world's nature, and all things must pass
From one condition to another: nothing
Continues like itself. All is in flux:
Nature is ever changing and compelling
All that exists to alter. For one thing
Moulders and wastes away grown weak with age,
And then another comes forth into light,
Issuing from obscurity. So thus Time
Changes the whole world's nature, and the Earth
Passes from one condition to another:
So that what once it bore it can no longer,
And now can bear what it did not before.

And many monsters too did the Earth essay
To produce in those days, creatures arising
With marvellous face and limbs, the Hermaphrodite,
A thing of neither sex, between the two,
Differing from both: some things deprived of feet;

Others again with no hands ; others dumb
Without mouths, or else blind for lack of eyes,
Or bound by limbs that everywhere adhered
Fast to their bodies, so that they could perform
No function, nor go anywhere, nor shun
Danger, nor take what their need might require.
Many such monstrous prodigies did Earth
Produce, in vain, since Nature banned their increase,
Nor could they reach the coveted flower of age,
Nor find food, nor be joined in bonds of love.
For we see numerous conditions first
Must meet together, before living things
Can beget and perpetuate their kind.
First they must have food, then a means by which
The seeds of birth may stream throughout the frame
From the relaxed limbs ; also that the male
And female may unite, they must have that
Whereby each may exchange mutual joys.

And many breeds of creatures in those days
Must have died out, being powerless to beget
And perpetuate their kind. For those which now
You see breathing the breath of life, 'tis craft,
Or courage, or else speed, that from its origin
Must have protected and preserved each race.
Moreover many by their usefulness
Commended to us, continue to exist
Favoured by our protection. The fierce breed
Of lions first, and the other savage beasts,
Their courage has preserved, foxes their craft,
Stags their swift flight. But the light-slumbering hearts
Of faithful dogs, and the whole family
Born from the seed of burden-bearing beasts,
Also the woolly flocks and horned herds,
All these by man's protection are preserved.
For their desire has always been to shun
Wild beasts and to live peaceably, supplied

Without toil of their own with food in plenty,
Which to reward their services we give them.
But those whom Nature has not thus endowed
With power either to live by their own means
Or else to render us such useful service
That in return we allow their race to feed
And dwell in safety beneath our guardianship,
All these, 'tis plain, would lie exposed a prey
To others, trammelled in their own fatal bonds,
Till Nature had extinguished that whole kind.

But Centaurs there have never been, nor yet
Ever can things exist of twofold nature
And double body moulded into one
From limbs of alien kind, whose faculties
And functions cannot be on either side
Sufficiently alike. That this is so,
The dullest intellect may be thus convinced.
Consider first that a horse after three years
Is in his flower of vigour, but a boy
By no means so : for often in sleep even then
Will he seek milk still from his mother's breasts
Afterwards, when the horse's lusty strength
Fails him in old age, and his limbs grow languid
As life ebbs, then first for a boy begins
The flowering time of youth, and clothes his cheeks
With soft down. Do not then believe that ever
From man's and burden-bearing horse's seed
Centaurs can be compounded and have being ;
Nor yet Scyllas with half-fish bodies girdled
With raging dogs, and other suchlike things,
Whose limbs we see discordant with themselves,
Since neither do they reach their flower together,
Nor acquire bodily strength, nor in old age
Lose it at the same time : dissimilar
In each the love that burns them, and their modes
Of life incongruous : nor do the same things give

Their bodies pleasure. Thus we may often see
Bearded goats thrive on hemlock, which for man
Is virulent poison. Since moreover flame
Is wont to scorch and burn the tawny bodies
Of lions no less than every other kind
Of flesh and blood on earth, how could it be
That one, yet with a triple body, in front
A lion, behind a serpent, in the midst
Its goat's self, a Chimaera should breathe forth
From such a body fierce flame at the mouth ?
Therefore he who can fable that when earth
Was new and the sky young, such animals
Could have been propagated, resting alone
Upon this vain term, newness, he no doubt
Will babble out many follies in like fashion,
Will say that rivers then throughout the earth
Commonly flowed with gold, that trees were wont
To bloom with jewels, or that man was born
Of such huge bulk and force that he could wade
With giant strides across deep seas and turn
The whole heaven round about him with his hands.
For the fact that there were many seeds of things
Within the earth at that time when it first
Shed living creatures forth, is yet no proof
That beasts could have been born of mingled kinds,
Or limbs of different animals joined together;
Because the various families of plants,
The crops and thriving trees, which even now
Teem upward from the soil luxuriantly,
Can yet never be born woven together;
But each thing has its own process of growth :
All must preserve their mutual differences,
Governed by Nature's irreversible law.

But that first race of men in the open fields
Was hardier far, (small wonder, since hard Earth
Had brought it forth,) built too around a frame

Of bones more large and solid, knit together
By powerful sinews ; nor was it easily
Impaired by heat or cold, nor by strange foods,
Nor yet by any bodily disease.
And during many revolving periods
Of the sun through the sky, they lived their lives
After the roving habit of wild beasts.
No one was then the bent plough's stalwart guide,
None yet had knowledge how to till the fields
With iron, or plant young saplings in the soil,
Nor how to lop old boughs from the tall trees
With pruning-hooks. What suns and rains had given,
What of her own free will Earth had brought forth,
Was enough bounty to content their hearts.
'Neath acorn-bearing oak-trees their wont was
To alleviate their hunger ; and those berries
Which now upon the arbutus you see
Ripening to scarlet hues in winter-time,
The Earth then bore more plentifully and larger
Than in these days. Moreover then the world's
Luxuriant youth gave birth to many kinds
Of coarse food, ample enough for wretched men.
But to allay their thirst rivers and springs
Invited, as now waters, tumbling down
From the great mountains with clear-sounding plash,
Summon from far the thirsting tribes of beasts.
Furthermore in their roamings they would visit
Those renowned silvan precincts of the Nymphs,
Caverns wherefrom they knew that copious streams,
Gushing forth smoothly, bathed the dripping rocks,
(The dripping rocks, o'er green moss trickling down,)
Or sometimes welled up over the level plain.
As yet they knew not how to employ fire,
Or to make use of skins, and clothe their bodies
With spoils of wild beasts ; but inhabiting
Woods, mountains, caves and forests, they would shelter
Their squalid limbs in thickets, when compelled

To shun the buffeting of winds and rains.
No regard could they have to a general good,
Nor did they know how to make use in common
Of any laws or customs. Whatsoever
Fortune might set before him, that would each
Take as his prize, cunning to thrive and live
As best might please him, each one for himself.
And in the woods Venus would join the bodies
Of lovers, whether a mutual desire,
Or the man's violence and vehement lust
Had won the woman over, or a bribe
Of acorns, arbute-berries or choice pears.
Endowed with marvellous strength of hands and feet
They chased the forest-roaming tribes of beasts ;
And many with flung stones and ponderous club
They overcame, some few they would avoid
In hiding-places. And like bristly swine
Just as they were they flung their savage limbs
Naked upon the ground, when night o'ertook them,
Enveloping themselves with leaves and boughs.
Nor did they call for daylight and the sun
Wandering terror-stricken about the fields
With loud wails through the shadows of the night,
But silently, buried in sleep they lay
Waiting until the sun with rosy torch
Brought light into the sky. For since from childhood
They had been wont to see darkness and light
Alternately begotten without fail,
Never could they feel wonder or misgiving
Lest night eternal should possess the earth
And the sun's light for ever be withdrawn.
But 'twas a worse anxiety that wild beasts
Often made sleep unsafe for these poor wretches.
For driven from their homes in sheltering rocks
They fled at the entrance of a foaming boar
Or strong lion, yielding up at dead of night
Their leaf-strewn beds in panic to fierce guests.

Yet no more often in those days than now
Would mortal men leave the sweet light of life
With lamentation. Each one by himself
Would doubtless be more likely then than now
To be seized and devoured by wild beasts' teeth,
A living food, and with his groans would fill
Mountains and forests, while he saw his own
Live flesh in a live monument entombed.
But those whom flight had saved with mangled body,
From that time forth would hold their trembling hands
Over their noisome scars, with dreadful cries
Invoking death, till agonising throes
Rid them of life, with none to give them aid,
Ignorant of what wounds required. But then
A single day did not consign to death
Thousands on thousands, marshalled beneath standards,
Nor did the turbulent waters of the deep
Shatter upon the rocks both ships and men.
At that time vainly, without aim or result
The sea would often rise up and turmoil ;
Nor could the winsome wiles of the calm deep
Lure men on treacherously with laughing waves,
While reckless seamanship was yet unknown.
Moreover lack of food would then consign
Their fainting limbs to death : now rather plenty
Sinks men to ruin. Often for themselves
Would they pour poison out unwittingly :
To others now with subtler skill they give it.

Afterwards, when they had learnt the use of huts,
And skins, and fire ; when woman, joined with man
In wedlock, dwelt apart in one abode,
And they saw offspring born out of themselves,
Then first the human race began to soften.
For fire made their chilly bodies now
Less able to endure the cold beneath
The roof of heaven : Venus impaired their strength :

And children easily by their blandishments
Broke down the haughty temper of their parents.
Then too neighbours began to join in bonds
Of friendship, wishing neither to inflict
Nor suffer violence : and for womankind
And children they would claim kind treatment, pleading
With cries and gestures inarticulately
That all men ought to have pity on the weak.
And though harmony could not everywhere
Be established, yet the most part faithfully
Observed their covenants, or man's whole race
Would even then have perished, nor till now
Could propagation have preserved their kind.

But it was Nature that constrained their tongues
To utter various sounds ; and need struck out
The names of things, in the same way almost
As impotence of tongue is itself seen
To teach gesture to infants, prompting them
To point at things around them. For all creatures
Divine by instinct how far they can use
Their natural powers. Thus before horns are born
And stand out on the forehead of a calf,
When he is angry, he butts and charges with it.
Then panther cubs and lion whelps will fight
With claws and feet and teeth, even at a time
When teeth and claws have hardly yet been formed.
Also we see how the whole race of birds
Trusting their wings, will seek a fluttering succour
From new-fledged pinions. Therefore to suppose
That somebody once apportioned names to things,
And that from him men learnt to use words first,
Is mere folly. For why should this one man
Be able to denote all things by words
And with his tongue form varied sounds, yet others
At the same time be deemed incapable
To have done the like ? Besides, if others too

Had not made use of words among themselves,
Whence was the preconception of their usefulness
Implanted in this man, and whence was given him
The primal power to know and comprehend
What he desired to do ? Again, one man
Could not subdue by force the wills of many
And compel them to learn the names of things.
It is no easy labour to convince
Deaf men, and teach them what they ought to do ;
Since not for long would they endure his voice,
Nor suffer unintelligible sounds
Fruitlessly to be dinned into their ears.
Lastly what should there be to wonder at
So much in this, that mankind, when their voice
And tongue were in full vigour, should name things
By different sounds as different feelings bade them,
Since dumb cattle, and even the wild beasts,
Are wont to emit distinct and varied sounds,
When they feel fear or pain, or when joy moves them.
This indeed may be learnt from manifest facts.
When the large soft mouths of Molossian dogs
Begin to growl, angrily laying bare
Their hard teeth, then far different is the tone
In which they threaten, savagely thus drawn back,
From the clear sound which, when they bark outright,
Fills the whole neighbourhood. And when they essay
In gentle mood to lick their cubs, or when
They toss them with their paws, and snapping at them
Tenderly make as though they would devour them
With half-closed teeth, thus fondling them they yelp
With a quite different sound from their deep bay
When left alone in houses, or from the whimper
With which crouching they shrink away from blows.
Furthermore does not a young stallion's neigh
Seem different, when he rages among the mares
Pierced in his flower of age by winged love's goads,
From when with wide-stretched nostrils he snorts out

The battle signal, or when at other times
Perchance he whinnies trembling in all his limbs ?
Lastly the race of fowl and varied birds,
Hawks and ospreys and gulls that seek their living
In the salt waters of the ocean waves,
Utter at different times quite different cries
From those they make when they fight over food,
Or struggle with their prey. And some will change
Their harsh notes in accordance with the weather,
As do the long-lived tribes of crows, and flocks
Of rooks, when they are said to call for rain,
Or sometimes to be summoning wind-storms.
Since therefore various feelings can compel
Animals, speechless though they be, to utter
Such varying sounds, how much more natural
Is it that in those days men could denote
Dissimilar things by many different sounds !

In answer to your silent questioning here,
I say it was the lightning first brought fire
Down to the earth for men ; and from that flame
All other flames have spread. Thus we behold
Many things blaze forth, lit by fire from heaven,
When the sky's stroke has charged them with its heat.
Yet when a branching tree, tossed by the wind,
Chafing the branches of another tree,
Sways to and fro, then fire may be forced out
By violent stress of friction ; and at times
Hot flames are kindled and flash forth from boughs
And stems rubbing together. Of these two chances
Either may first have given fire to men.
Next the sun taught them to cook food, heating
And softening it with flame ; since they would note
Many things mellowing about the fields
Smitten and conquered by his scorching rays.

And more and more each day men who excelled

In subtlety and power of mind, would show them
How by new methods and by using fire
To improve their former means of livelihood.
Kings began to found cities and build forts
As refuges and strongholds for themselves,
Dividing cattle and lands, and portioning
To each his share according to his beauty,
His strength and intellect; for comeliness
Was much esteemed, and strength was paramount.
Afterwards property was devised, and gold
Discovered, which with ease robbed both the strong
And beautiful of their honours: for most men,
However brave and beautiful by birth,
Follow the fortunes of the richer man.
But whosoever by true reason's rule
Governs his days, for him plain frugal living
And a contented spirit is mighty wealth;
For of a little never is there lack.
Yet men wished to become renowned and powerful,
That so their fortunes on a stable base
Might rest, and they, being wealthy, might have power
To lead a tranquil life: in vain! For while
They strove to mount to the highest pitch of honour
Their path was perilous: and even although
They have reached the summit, envy will sometimes
Strike like a thunderbolt and hurl men down
Contemptuously to noisome Tartarus:
Since highest things, lifted above all else,
Are most wont as by lightning to be blasted
By envy; so that quietly to obey
Is better than to crave sovereign power
And lordship over realms. Therefore let men
Sweat drops of blood, wearying themselves in vain,
Struggling along ambition's narrow road;
Since from the mouths of others comes their wisdom,
And 'tis from hearsay rather than their own
Authentic feelings, they pursue such aims:

Nor does this happen now, nor will it happen
Hereafter any more than once it did.

Kings therefore being slain, the ancient majesty
Of thrones and haughty sceptres was laid low.
The glorious symbol of the sovereign head,
Trodden bloodstained beneath the people's feet,
Mourned its proud honour lost ; for that is greedily
Trampled down which before was too much feared.
Thus to the very lees of anarchy
The whole state was reduced, while each man grasped
At lordship and dominion for himself.
Then some among them taught how to create
Magistrates, and established codes, that all
Might learn to obey laws. For now mankind,
Utterly wearied of a violent life,
Lay languishing by reason of its feuds.
Therefore the sooner of its own free will
Did it submit to laws and stringent codes.
For seeing that each, when anger prompted him,
Strove more severely to avenge himself
Than just laws now permit; for this cause men
Grew tired of a life of violence.
Thenceforward fear of punishment infects
The enjoyment of life's prizes : for the nets
Of violence and wrong entangle all those
Who inflict them, and most often they recoil
On such as used them first : nor is it easy
For him to pass a quiet and peaceful life,
Whose deeds transgress the bonds of public peace.
For though he should elude both gods and men,
Yet he must needs mistrust whether his guilt
Will remain veiled for ever, since 'tis said
That many often by talking in their dreams,
Or in delirious sickness have betrayed
Their secrets, and revealed long-hidden crimes.

Now what may be the cause that has spread wide
The cult of deities over mighty nations,
And filled cities with altars, and prescribed
The observance of such sacred rites as now
At solemn times and places are performed,
Whence even now is implanted in men's minds
Religious awe, that over the whole earth
Raises new temples to the gods, and prompts
Worshippers to frequent them on feast-days—
Why this should be, 'tis easy to explain.
For in those early times mortals would see
With waking mind the glorious images
Of deities and behold them in their sleep
Of size yet more gigantic. To these then
They would attribute sense, because they seemed
To move their limbs and utter stately speech
Worthy of their noble aspect and great powers.
Also they deemed eternal life was theirs,
Because their images continually
Would reappear, and their form did not change,
But most because they could not well conceive
How beings who seemed gifted with such powers
Could lightly be subdued by any force.
And they believed that their felicity
Must be beyond compare, since none of them
Was ever troubled by the fear of death,
Because moreover in sleep they beheld them
Performing without effort many miracles.
Again they saw how the orderings of heaven
And the year's varying seasons would return
According to fixed law, yet could they not
Discover from what causes this took place.
Therefore they found a refuge from such doubts
In handing all things over to the deities
And deeming all to be guided by their nod.
The abodes of their divinities they placed
In heaven, because they saw night and the moon

Progressing through the sky, moon day and night,
The severe constellations of the night,
The sky's night-wandering meteors and gliding fires,
Clouds sun and snow, lightning and winds and hail,
Thunder's swift crash and mightily threatening murmurs.

O unhappy race of men, that could assign
Such functions to the deities, and thereto
Add cruel wrath! What groans then for themselves
Did they beget, what wounds for us, what tears
For our children's children! 'Tis no piety
To be seen often with veiled head to turn
Towards a stone, visiting every altar,
Nor to fall grovelling with outspread palms
Prostrate before the temples of the gods,
Nor sprinkling altars with much blood of beasts
To add to votive offering votive offering;
But this rather is piety, to have power
To survey all things with a tranquil mind.
For when we lift our eyes to the celestial
Temples of the great universe, and the aether
Studded with glittering stars, and contemplate
The paths of sun and moon, then in our breasts,
Burdened with other evils, this fear too
Begins to lift its reawakened head,
Lest perchance it be true that with the gods
Resides a boundless power, which can move
Upon their various courses the bright stars.
For ignorance of cause troubles the mind,
So that it doubts whether there ever was
A birth-time and beginning for the world,
And likewise whether there shall be an end;
How far the world's walls can endure this strain
Of restless motion, or whether by the gods
With eternal stability endowed
They may glide on through endless lapse of time,
Defying the strong powers of infinite age.

Again whose mind shrinks not with awe of gods,
Whose limbs creep not for terror, when beneath
The appalling stroke of thunder the parched earth
Shudders, and mutterings run through the vast sky ?
Do not the peoples and the nations quake,
And proud kings, stricken with religious dread
Sit quailing, lest for any wicked deed
Or overweening word, the heavy time
Of reckoning and punishment be ripe ?
Also when the full violence of a wind
Raging across the sea, sweeps o'er the waves
The high commander of a fleet, with all
His powerful legions and his elephants,
Does he not supplicate the gods with vows
For mercy, and with craven prayers entreat them
To lull the storm and grant propitious gales ?
But all in vain ; since often none the less,
Seized by the violent hurricane, he is whirled
Onto the shoals of death. Thus evermore
Some hidden power treads human grandeur down,
And seems to make its sport of the proud rods
And cruel axes, crushed beneath its heel.
Lastly, when the whole earth rocks under them,
And cities tumble with the shock, or stand
In doubt, threatening to fall, what wonder is it
That mortal creatures should abase themselves,
Assigning vast dominion to the gods,
And wondrous powers to govern all below ?

Now must be told how copper gold and iron,
And weighty silver also, and solid lead
Were first discovered when on the great hills
Fire had consumed huge forests with its heat,
Kindled either by lightning from the sky,
Or because men waging some forest war
Had carried fire among their enemies
For terror's sake ; or else because, drawn on

By the soil's goodness, they would wish to clear
Fat lands and turn them unto pasturage,
Or to kill beasts and grow rich with the spoils.
For hunting with the pitfall and with fire
Came into use before woods were enclosed
With nets or drawn by dogs. Howe'er that be,
From whatsoever cause the heat of flame
With terrible crackling had devoured whole forests
Down to their deepest roots, and throughly baked
The soil with fire, forth from the burning veins
There would ooze and collect in cavities
Streams of silver and gold, of copper too,
And lead. When afterwards men found these metals
Cooled into masses glittering on the ground
With brilliant colours, they would pick them up,
Attracted by their bright smooth loveliness ;
And they would then observe how each was formed
Into a shape similar to the imprint
Of the hole where it lay. Next it would strike them
That, melted down by heat, these could be made
To run into any form and mould they pleased,
And further could by hammering be wrought
Into points tapering as sharp and fine
As they might need, so furnishing themselves
With tools wherewith to cut down woods, hew timber
And plane planks smooth, to drill and pierce and bore.
And this they would attempt with silver and gold
No less than with stout copper's mighty strength.
But in vain, since their yielding force would fail,
Being proved less fit to endure toil and strain.
In those days copper was more highly esteemed ;
Gold lay despised as useless with its dull
And blunted edge : now copper lies neglected,
Whereas gold has attained the pitch of honour.
Thus Time as it revolves is ever changing
The seasons of things. What was once esteemed
Becomes at length of no repute ; whereon

Some other thing, issuing from contempt,
Mounts up and daily is coveted more and more,
And, once discovered, blossoms out in praises,
Rising to wondrous honour among men.

Now, Memmius, you will easily of yourself
Understand in what way were first discovered
The properties of iron. Man's earliest weapons
Were hands nails teeth and stones, and boughs torn off
From forest trees, and flame and fire, as each
Became known. Afterwards the force of iron
And copper was discovered. And the use
Of copper was known earlier than of iron,
Since it was easier to be worked, and found
More copiously. With copper they would till
The soil of earth, with copper they stirred up
The waves of war, and dealt wide-gaping wounds,
And seized on lands and cattle : for all else,
Being naked and unarmed, would yield to those
Who carried weapons. Then by slow degrees
The sword of iron made progress, while the type
Of the copper sickle came to be despised.
With iron they began to cleave the soil,
And through its use wavering war's conflicts
Were rendered equal. Earlier was the custom
Of mounting armed upon a horse's back
And guiding it with reins, and dealing blows
With the right arm, long before men dared tempt
The risks of battle in the two-horsed car.
And they would learn the art to yoke two steeds
Earlier than to yoke four, or to mount armed
Upon scythed chariots. Next the Poeni taught
The uncouth Lucanian kine,[1] with towered backs
And snake-like hands, to endure the wounds of war,
And rout great troops of martial chivalry.
Thus miserable discord brought to birth

[1] Elephants.

One thing after another, to appal
Mankind's embattled nations, every day
Making addition to war's frightfulness.

Also in warfare they made trial of bulls,
And sought to drive fierce boars against the foe.
And some sent mighty lions in their van
With armed trainers and savage guardians
To govern them and hold them in with chains ;
In vain, for heated with promiscuous carnage
They put to flight whole squadrons in their rage
Without distinction, tossing on every side
Their terrible crests ; nor could the horsemen calm
Their horses, panic-stricken by the roaring,
Or turn them by the bridle against their foes.
The she-lions would spring fiercely on all sides
Right in the faces of their adversaries,
Or from behind seizing them off their guard
Would clasp and tear them wounded down to the earth,
Gripping them with their strong teeth and hooked claws.
The bulls would toss and trample underfoot
Their own friends, goring the horses from beneath
In belly and flank, tearing the soil up savagely.
Fierce boars would rend their allies with strong tusks,
Staining the broken weapons with their blood,
And put to rout both horse and foot together.
The steeds, to escape from the tusk's cruel push,
Would swerve aside or rearing paw the air,
In vain, for with severed tendons they would crash
Heavily down to the earth and lie stretched out.
Beasts, by the keepers deemed to have been tamed
Sufficiently at home, they now would see
Heated to madness in the hour of battle,
By wounds and shouts, flight panic and uproar.
No portion of all the different kinds of beasts,
Once scattered in wild flight, could they recall.
So often nowadays the Lucanian kine,

Gashed cruelly with the steel, will fly dispersed,
Inflicting ruinous havoc on their friends.
Thus might these men have acted : yet I scarce
Can think they were not able to foresee
And calculate how horrible a disaster
Was certain to befall both sides alike.
But men chose to act thus, not in the hope
Of victory so much, as from the wish,
Though they themselves perished, to give their foes
Cause to lament, being desperate through mistrust
Of their own numbers, or through lack of arms.

The plaited garment came before the dress
Of woven stuff. Weaving comes after iron,
Since weaving tools need iron to fashion them.
By no means else can such smooth things be made
As heddles, spindles, shuttles and clattering yarn-beams.
Men before womankind did Nature prompt
To work wool ; for in general the male sex
Is by far the more skilful and ingenious :
Till the rough peasants chided them so sternly
That at length they consented to resign
Such lighter tasks into the hands of women,
And themselves took their share in heavier toils,
Hardening with hard labour limbs and hands.

But Nature, the creatress, herself first
Taught men to sow and prompted them to graft.
For berries and acorns dropping from the trees
Would put forth in due season underneath
Swarms of seedlings : and hence the fancy came
To insert grafts upon the boughs, and plant
Young saplings in the soil about the fields.
Next they would try another and yet another
Method of tilling their loved piece of land,
And so could watch how kindly fostering culture
Helped the earth to improve its own wild fruits.

And they would force the forests day by day
To retreat higher up the mountain-sides
And yield the ground below to husbandry,
That so meadows and ponds, rivulets, crops,
And glad vineyards might cover hill and plain,
While grey-green boundary strips of olive trees
Might run between the fields, stretching far out
O'er hillock, valley and plain ; as now we see
Whole countrysides glowing with varied beauty,
Adorned with rows of sweet fruit-bearing trees,
And enclosed round about with joyous groves.

But the art of imitating with their mouths
The liquid notes of birds, came long before
Men could delight their ears by singing words
To smooth tunes ; and the whistlings of the zephyr
In hollow reeds first taught the husbandman
To blow through hollow stalks. Then by degrees
They learnt those sweet sad ditties, which the pipe,
Touched by the fingers of the melodist,
Pours forth, such as are heard 'mid pathless woods,
Forests and glades, or in the lonely haunts
Of shepherds, and the abodes of magic calm.
Thus would they soothe and gratify their minds,
When satiate with food ; for all such things
Give pleasure then. So often, couched together
On the soft grass, beside a waterbrook
Beneath a tall tree's boughs, at no great cost
They would regale their bodies joyously,
At those times chiefly when the weather smiled,
And the year's seasons painted the green herbage
With flowers. Then went round the jest, the tale,
The merry laugh, for then the rustic muse
Was in full force : then frolick jollity
Would prompt them to enwreathe their heads and
shoulders
With plaited garlands woven of flowers and leaves,

Or dancing out of measure to move their limbs
Clumsily, and with clumsy foot to beat
Their mother earth; whence smiles and jovial laughter
Would rise; since the more novel then and strange
All such sports seemed, the more they were admired.
And they would find a salve for wakefulness
In giving voice to many varied tones
Of winding melody, running with curved lip
Over the reed-pipes: and from them this custom
Is handed down to watchmen nowadays,
Who, though they have better learnt to observe time,
Yet not one whit more pleasure do they enjoy
Than once that silvan race of earth-born men.
For what is present, if we have never known
Anything more delightful, gives us pleasure
Beyond all else, and seems to be the best;
But if some better thing be afterwards
Discovered, this will often spoil for us all
That pleased us once, and change our feelings towards it.
Thus it was acorns came to be disliked:
Thus were abandoned those beds of strewn grass
And heaped leaves: the dress too of wild beast's skin
Fell thus into contempt. Yet I suppose
That when it was invented it would rouse
Such envy, that the man who wore it first
Would be waylaid and slain: yet after all
It would be torn to pieces among the thieves
And with much bloodshed utterly destroyed,
So that it never could be turned to use.
Therefore skins then, now gold and purple vex
Men's lives with cares and wear them out with war.
And here, I think, the greater guilt is ours;
For the cold would torment these earth-born men
Naked without their skins; but us no harm
Whatever can it cause to go without

A purple robe broidered with large designs
In gold thread, so we have but on our backs
A plain plebeian cloak to keep us warm.
Therefore mankind is always toiling vainly,
Fruitlessly wasting life in empty cares,
Doubtless because they will not recognise
The limits of possession, nor the bounds
Beyond which no true pleasure can increase.
And so by slow degrees this ignorance
Has carried life out into the deep seas,
And from the bottom stirred up war's huge waves.

But those vigilant watchers, sun and moon,
That circling round illumine with their light
The vast revolving temple of the sky,
Taught mankind how the seasons of the year
Return, and how all things are brought to pass
According to fixed system and fixed law.

And now men dwelt securely fenced about
By strong towers, and the land was portioned out
And marked off to be tilled. Already now
The sea was white with flitting sails, and towns
Were joined in league of friendship and alliance.
Then first poets made record in their songs
Of men's deeds : for not long before this time
Letters had been invented. For which cause
Our age cannot look backward to things past,
Save where reason reveals some evidence.

Shipping and agriculture, city-walls,
Laws, arms, roads, robes and other suchlike things,
Moreover all life's prizes and refinements,
Poems and pictures, and the chiselling
Of fine-wrought statues, every one of these
Long practice and the untiring mind's experience
Taught men by slow degrees, as they progressed

Step after step. Thus time little by little
Brings forth each several thing, and reason lifts it
Into the borders of the light; for first
One thing and then another must in turn
Rise from obscurity, until each art
Attains its highest pitch of excellence.

BOOK VI, lines 1–95

In ancient days Athens of glorious name
Was first to spread abroad corn-bearing crops
Among unhappy mortals, and to frame
Their lives in a new mould and give them laws.
She also first bestowed a kindly solace
For life, when she gave birth to one endowed
With so great intellect, that man who once
Poured forth all wisdom from truth-telling lips;
Whose glory, even when his light was quenched,
Because of his divine discoveries
Undimmed by time was noised abroad, and now
Is lifted high as heaven. For when he saw
That well nigh all those things which need demands
For man's subsistence had been now provided,
And that so far as it seemed possible
Life was established in security,
That men through wealth and honours and renown
Had attained power and affluence, and grown proud
In their children's good name, yet that not one
At home possessed a heart the less care-stricken,
But ceaselessly despite his wiser mind
Tormenting all his days, could not refrain
From petulant rage and wearisome complaint;
Then did he understand it was the vessel
Itself that was the cause of imperfection,
And by its imperfection all those things
That came within it, gathered from outside,
Though ne'er so excellent, were spoiled therein;
In part because he saw that there were holes
Through which it leaked, so that by no means ever
Might it be filled full; partly that he perceived

How as with a foul savour it defiled
All things within it which had entered there.
And so with truthful words he purged men's hearts,
And fixed a limit to desire and fear;
Then setting forth what was the highest good
Which we all strive to attain, he pointed out
The path along which by a slender track
We might in a straight course arrive at it;
Likewise he showed what evils there must be
In mortal affairs on every side, arising
And flying this way and that, whether it were
By natural chance or force, since it was Nature
Which has ordained it so; and by what gates
To meet each evil men must sally forth:
Also he proved how mostly without cause
Mankind set darkly tossing in their hearts
The sad billows of care. For just as children
In the blind darkness tremble and are afraid
Of all things, so we sometimes in the light
Fear things that are no whit more to be dreaded
Than those which children shudder at in the dark,
Imagining that they will come to pass.
This terror then and darkness of the mind
Must needs be scattered not by the sun's beams
And day's bright arrows, but by contemplation
Of Nature's aspect and her inward laws.

And now that I have shown you how the sky's
Mansions are mortal, and that heaven is formed
Of a body that had birth, and since of all
That takes place and must needs take place therein
I have unravelled most, give further heed
To what remains. Since once I have made bold
To mount the glorious chariot of the Muses,[1]
I will now tell how in the upper air
Tempests of wind arise; how all sinks down

[1] The text is here corrupt, and several lines are probably lost.

To rest once more : the turmoil that has been
Vanishes, when its fury is appeased.
And I will explain all else that mortals see
Coming to pass on earth and in the sky,
Such sights as often hold them in terrified
Suspense of mind, humiliating themselves
With fear of gods, and bow them grovelling
Down to the ground, because they are compelled
Through ignorance of the causes to assign
All such things to the empire of the gods,
Acknowledging their power to be supreme.
For those who have learnt rightly that the gods
Lead a life free from care, if yet they wonder
By what means all things can be carried on,
Such above all as are perceived to happen
In the ethereal regions overhead,
They are borne back again into their old
Religious fears, and adopt pitiless lords,
Whom in their misery they believe to be
Almighty ; for they are ignorant of what can
And what cannot exist ; in fine they know not
Upon what principle each thing has its powers
Limited, and its deep-set boundary stone.
And therefore all the more they are led astray
By blind reasoning. So that if you cannot
Fling from your mind and banish far away
All such belief in falsehoods that degrade
The deities, and consist not with their peace,
Then, thus by you disparaged and profaned,
Oft will their holy godheads do you hurt ;
Not that their sovereign power can be impaired,
So that in anger they should stoop to exact
Fierce penalties, but because you yourself
Will fancy that those placid beings throned
In serene peace, can verily be tossed
By great billows of wrath : nor will you enter
With a calm breast the temples of the gods,

Nor yet will you be able to receive
In tranquil peace of spirit those images
Which from their holy bodies, heralding
Their divine beauty, float into men's minds.
And to what kind of life these errors lead
May be imagined. Such credulity
The most veracious reasoning alone
Can drive far from us. And though to that end
I have set forth much already, yet more still
Remains for me to adorn in polished verses.
The inward law and aspect of the heavens
Must now be grasped: tempests and vivid lightnings,
Their action and what cause sets them in motion,
Must be described; lest, when you have mapped the sky
Into augural divisions, you should then
Quake in dismay, beholding from what quarter
The flash sped in its flight, or on which side
It vanished; in what manner it pierced through
Into walled places, and how, having played
The tyrant there, it leapt forth and was gone.
Yet of these operations by no means
Can men perceive the causes, and so fancy
That they must come to pass by power divine.
O Muse of knowledge, solace of mankind
And the delight of gods, Calliope,
Point the track out before me as I speed
Towards the white line of my final goal,
That so with thee to guide me I may win
The glorious crown of victory and its praise.

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